

Class identity + Precariat



Definition of class



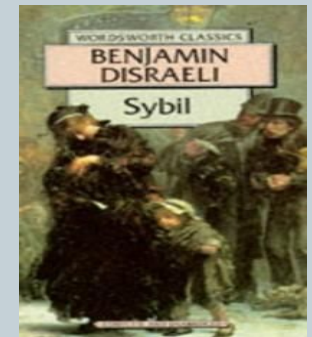
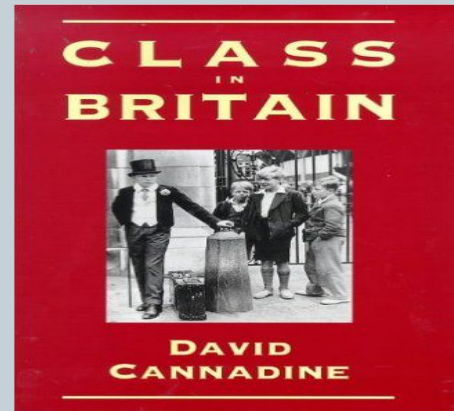
- A **social class** is a large group of people occupying a similar position in an economic system. There are several different dimensions of social class:
- income
- wealth
- power
- occupation
- education
- race and ethnicity

Three historical models of class



- **Hierarchical (ranks and orders)** - valid in Britain until the late 18th century > a complex web of social hierarchies that are God-given, forming an organic whole; each rank is necessary for the society to function
- **Triadic (three classes)** > upper, middle and working class > born during the Industrial Revolution as workers migrated to cities and established a distinct identity
- **Dichotomous (Two Nations)** – coined by PM Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Sibyl* > an idea of two alienated social groups (the rich and poor)
- This model is currently gaining currency as inequality deepens and middle class us under threat of impoverishment (the “hollowing out” of the middle class)
- (based on *Class In Britain* by David Cannadine, prominent social historian)

- “Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are
- ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers
- in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws ...**THE RICH AND THE POOR** “ – Benjamin Disraeli: *Sybil*



The traditional triadic model of class system

- Working class
- Middle class
- Upper class

... with some possible subdivisions

Each class distinguished by its:

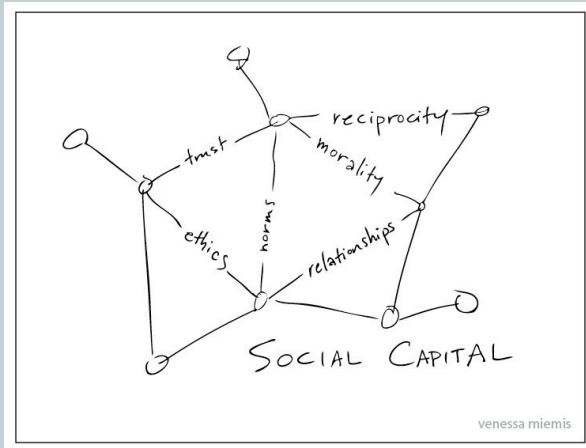
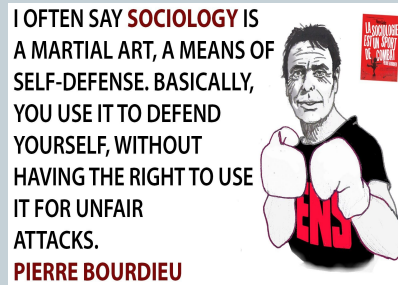
- a) Economic capital
- b) Social capital
- c) Cultural capital



Types of capital

- Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) – French sociologist and anthropologist

- His work was primarily concerned with the dynamics of power in society

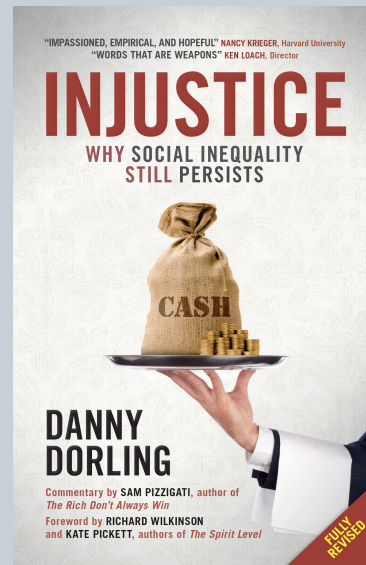


- **Economic capital (wealth)** - economic resources such as cash, property, investments ...)
- **Social capital (connections)** - resources that one gains from being part of a network of social relationships, including group membership. Social capital promotes the quality of life.
- **Cultural capital (education and interests)** – non-financial assets enabling social mobility, such as knowledge, skills, qualifications, style of speech, appearance. Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current system.

Social mobility

- “Social mobility is shifting from one social status to another, commonly to a status that is either higher or lower. For example, a child of day laborers who becomes a professor achieves upward social mobility. In sociology, social mobility explains changes (or lack thereof) in social status. Societies organized by social class, rather than caste, usually allow greater social mobility; in such societies, one's ability to achieve a higher social status can depend on factors such as social connections, wealth, effort, and education. In meritocracies, social status depends on merit. Gender and race can limit upward social mobility, and many sociologists believe social mobility depends more on social structures — such as the opportunities offered to different groups of people — rather than individual efforts.”
- <http://www.chegg.com/homework-help/definitions/social-mobility>

- Currently, social mobility in Britain is falling due to the combination of low-wage type of economy and the growing inequalities in society. It is now lower than it was in the 1920s.



FULLY
REVISED

Great British Class Survey 2013



- **Huge survey reveals seven social classes in UK**
- 3 April 2013
- [UK www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

Previous definitions of social class are considered to be outdated. People in the UK now fit into seven social classes, a major survey conducted by the BBC suggests.

It says the traditional categories of working, middle and upper class are outdated, fitting 39% of people. It found a new model of seven social classes ranging from the elite at the top to a "precariat" - the poor, precarious proletariat - at the bottom.

More than 161,000 people took part in the Great British Class Survey, the largest study of class in the UK.

Class has traditionally been defined by occupation, wealth and education. But this research argues that this is too simplistic, suggesting that class has three dimensions - economic, social and cultural. The BBC Lab UK study measured economic capital - income, savings, house value - and social capital - the number and status of people someone knows. The study also measured cultural capital, defined as the extent and nature of cultural interests and activities.

New class structure according to Great British Class Survey



- **Elite** (6%, wealthiest and most privileged group)
- **Established Middle Class** (25%, employed in management and traditional professions; a busy social and cultural life)
- **Technical Middle Class** (6%, work in research, science and technical occupations; mostly only socialize among themselves; heavy use of emergent culture, mostly social media)
- **New Affluent Workers** (15%, medium levels of wealth, young and socially active)
- **Emergent Service Workers** (19% young, urban, low on wealth but rich in social life and emergent culture; service sector or healthcare)
- **Traditional Working Class** (16%, low income but many are homeowners, culturally and socially conservative, older than other groups)
- **Precariat** (15%, the most deprived class, low income and social + cultural engagement, live in permanent insecurity)

The Precariat

- The rest of the lecture will be devoted to the Precariat, the emerging class in today's Britain



Precurity



- Concept of precarity = *“Financial and existential insecurity arising from the flexibilization of labor”* (Brophy and Peuter 180)
- Flexibilization (and casualisation) of labour – a phenomenon of the transition from industrial “Fordist” to post-industrial society
- ***“Precarity results from, in part, the demands of the 60s to a less-rigid workplace. Precarity in this sense is the outgrowth of Fordism, it is post-Fordist, post-assembly line, post-one-job-for-life labour. However, the exploitation of precisely this development announces the precarious class. As employers no longer have to commit to their employees, no longer have to think of employees as long-term partners in the functioning of a business, employees are like stock: they become replaceable on a seasonal basis. [...] As the Frassanito Network writes, precarity means unsure, uncertain, difficult, delicate”***
(Holmes)

Precariat vocabulary

- Immaterial workers
- Mc Jobs
- Freelancers
- Temps
- Part-timers
- Freeters
- Contingent workers



MCJOB: A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one.

Guy Standing, author of *Precariat: the New Dangerous Class*

Composition of precariat:

- those who fell out of the working class jobs and communities
- those who accept insecurity because they've never known anything better (migrants, single mothers, disabled)
- Young educated people experiencing status frustration
- > his definition of the precariat is wider than that by the Great Class Survey



Jobs of the precariat

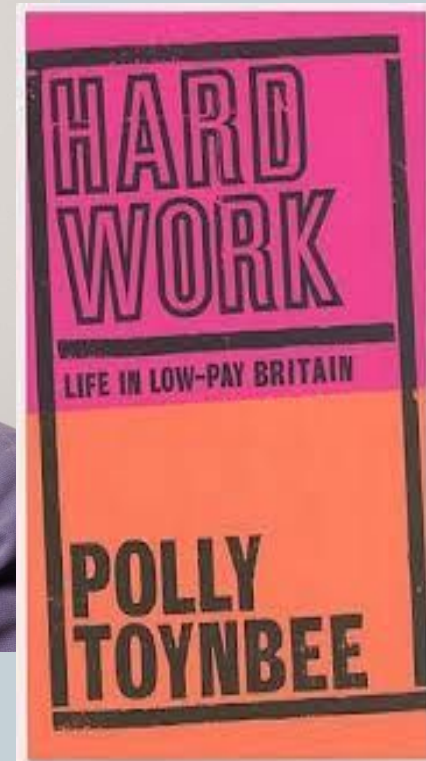
Typical jobs:

- Supermarket staff (retail = Britain's biggest employer)
- Call centre staff
- Workers in formerly public sector jobs which have now been contracted out to private companies (ancillary hospital staff, care workers, cleaners)



Polly Toynbee

- In the spirit of Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* or Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* – Toynbee spent several months living precariat life, working as:
- hospital porter
- dinner lady
- call-centre worker
- nursery assistant
- cleaner
- cake packer
- care home attendant



Precarious work - temporary contracts

- The jobs available for the precariat are often agency jobs rather than permanent positions
- Many are either part-time or even on the so-called **zero-hour contract** (a contract is signed with an employer where one has to be available at all times but the number of hours worked is not guaranteed)
- In addition, searching for these jobs – very time-consuming; travelling long distances for interviews, waiting in long queues of applicants (this may be difficult for a low-income earner or a person on benefits who wants to get into work)
- Low pay-no pay cycle:
- “Just jumping from job to job, it’s no way to go. It’s a nightmare! Jack of all trades, master of none. I just want something with a bit of job security – where maybe I can buy me own house in the future rather than where you’ve got to be on a wing and prayer type of thing ... Rather than just looking for one all the time or just jumping from job to job.”
- (Rowntree)

Low-quality of working life



- Precariat workers – almost no power over their work activity; little of autonomy on the workplace, heavily surveilled work, often regulated by computer
- Required to do extra hours at very short notice, working unsocial hours (impact on personal life), being sacked for taking sick leave
- Lack of social interaction with other workers; working alongside each other but not communicating
- Verbal abuse from customers > psychological impact (Owen)
- Result > high staff turnover
- Those more likely to stay: women
 - inability to find better work that could be combined with childcare
 - anxiety and fear of risk-taking

Low pay, low status

- However demanding or responsible (care home workers, nursery assistants) – many of the jobs done by the precariat copy the minimum-wage rate (£ 6.30)
- The low levels of pay across the precariat – the most shocking discovery made by Toynebee
- Despite the claims by Standing; this seems to be a more serious development than the precarity of jobs determined by the trend of flexibility
- The low wage rate and the resulting low status of the workers – often masked by the clean, hi-tech work environment or the neat “demotic” uniforms worn by the staff (usually company polo-neck T-shirts)
- “Whatever else, private companies are good at eye-catching uniforms, branding their employees all over, offering a reassuring appearance of confidence and affluence whatever the reality beneath the logos.” (Toynebee: 59)



Self-image



- As a result of their employment and financial insecurity - the precariat perceive life as a daily struggle
- Interestingly (Rowntree), many people in severe hardship typically reject “poverty” and “the poor” as terms relating to them; instead, they stress the normality of their lives and take pride in their ability to manage, in opposition to the shame and stigma attached to the concept of poverty
- Despite working, most low-income workers still depend on some form of welfare assistance (tax credits etc.)
- They deplore reliance on benefits and are very sensitive to being perceived as “scroungers” as they are often portrayed by right-wing or populist media
- *“It’s not as though I’m not aware of budgeting, and this is what I normally do as a family, but there just isn’t enough to cover everything and I’ve got one thing under control, then I’m taking from something else, for something we need, like food, shopping or rent – general living (31-year old single women on a low income, one child)”*

Living on borrowed money



- The omnipresence of debt in the life of the precariat
- Some explanations:
 - used out of consumerist greed (right-wing media)
 - used to maintain dignity and social acceptance (Danny Dorling: *Why Inequality Persists*)
- The reports of the Joseph Rowntree Foundations, corroborated by Toynbee's experience, reveal that credit is most frequently used to cover the most basic needs, not on "extras"
- The low pay-no pay (Rowntree article under Employment!) is especially conducive to reliance on debt
- As it is difficult to obtain loans from banks due to low creditworthiness, money is borrowed from relatives, friends or loan sharks

Roof over the precariat's head: renting

- The squeeze > forces the precariat into sub-standard housing
- No prospect of home ownership
- Precarity of renting – short-term rent contracts, frequent relocation
- Worry over rent payment – one of the biggest concerns (up to 60% of take-home pay; a single day of missed work means risk of falling into arrears)
- Some landlords – unwilling to rent to people on housing benefits (No DSS signs in windows)
- This discrimination against benefit claimants – throwback to the 1950s signs “No blacks, no dogs, no Irish”.
- The impermanence of rented housing - prevents the creation of meaningful community life (picture No DSS)

- *For some tenants, renting is a constant source of joy. Just one, vast panorama of happiness. A gorgeous extemporanea full of glee. For others, mostly the impoverished renter, whose work is precarious or those crammed in and insecure where demand is impossible high, it's horrible.*

(Penny Anderson – Rentergirl)



Roof over the precariat's head: council housing

- *“I stood at the window looking down on the scene below, noticing how people scuttled in and out of their blocks, hurrying to their front door [...] Everyone here walked fast and purposefully across no-man’s land. No-one sauntered through these unwelcoming public spaces, no-one looked much to right or left, avoiding eye-contact for fear of some unwelcome encounter. There were not even clumps of kids hanging about. The only place to be was the safe, familiar, private space of your own flat. That’s how it felt; safe up there looking out, but with a desert down below to cross to get to the streets and bus stops of the outside world. Estates are curious places, locking the people out of sight.”*
(Toynbee 17)

- Again, social life is curtailed due to the alienating conditions on the council accommodation available to the precariat



Missing out on life



- The precarity of life – prevents long-term planning; life is lived from day to day
- Few prospects of upward mobility – the entry-level jobs available do not offer many promotion opportunities
- Delays in leaving parental home (boomerang son, kidult)
- Delays in starting a family
- Disrupted life due to the unsocial hours worked or the need for several jobs
- Psychological problems (anxiety, depression, feeling a failure)

Absence of cultural capital



- GBCS – identified the Precariat as having the lowest cultural capital > difficulty engaging in activities that are a source of enjoyment and relaxation
- Result = social exclusion
- ***“Everything I did was limited by the shortage of cash. Shops simply vanished from my horizon and I realized how important they were to me, as they are to most people in modern life. Well-worn and familiar tracts of the city devoted to pleasure, art, eating, clothe and shopping disappeared from my map. Wherever I walked, everything I passed was out of bounds, things belonging to other people but not to me. No Starbucks, no Borders bookshop, no restaurants, not even the most humble café. This is what ‘exclusion’ means, if you ever wondered at this modern wider definition of poverty. It is a large No entry sign on every ordinary pleasure. No entry to the consumer society where the rest of us live. It is a harsh apartheid”.*** (Toynbee 239)

Conclusion

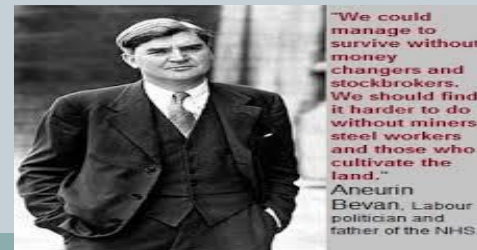
- The emergence of the Precariat – one of the most significant changes to the traditional British social structure
- Risk factors for the British precariat:
- High degree of inequality and low social mobility of British society > precarity trap
- Government welfare cuts – risk of deepening poverty
- Demands of the labour market for flexible workforce
- Threat – emergence of a class without a positive identity, defined merely by the shared deprivation and lack of economic, social and cultural capital
- Given the post-war development towards greater equality, inclusion and social mobility, the present development is a step back in time.



Update – effects of the Government’s welfare reform (“austerity”) on the growing class divide



- Until recently – “austerity” meant the wartime and post-war economy (1939-1955)
 - Food rationing and other restrictions on consumption with the intent of containing demand and promoting export and investment
 - Importantly, accompanied by major social reforms improving the lives of the working class > building of the Welfare State
 - *“By 1952, a consensus had formed in Britain that it was possible to create a society where all could live without fear or going hungry, being poorly housed, or of living with (or dying in) great pain. Although there was still much to argue about, by a generation after the stock market crash of 1929, that consensus was one which regarded the possibilities of the future with optimism.”* Daniel Dorling
 - Nye Bevan: *In Place of Fear* (1952)



“We could manage to survive without money changers and stockbrokers. We should find it harder to do without miners, steel workers and those who cultivate the land.”
Aneurin Bevan, Labour politician and father of the NHS.

Austerity under David Cameron

- Different economic situation > the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis
- oversupply, lack of demand
- Shared feature: in both cases a large public deficit was inherited > a tendency to rebalance the economy
- Crucial difference: a key element of rebalancing the economy is now to roll back the state and introduce cuts to welfare (the opposite of the postwar strategy)



“We are sticking to the task. But that doesn't just mean making difficult decisions on public spending. It also means something more profound. It means building a leaner, more efficient state. We need to do more with less. Not just now, but permanently.” D. Cameron

Austerity policies

- Two main areas of cuts – benefits and local government, although they make up only 26% of central government expenditure
- Loss of over 750 000 public sector jobs
- Wage freezes in remaining public sector jobs
- A major shake-up of the welfare state, incl. eradicating or reconfiguring some key benefits
- Introduction of benefit sanctions
- The most controversial policy = the **bedroom tax** (penalizing people for having an extra room)

THE SOCIAL HOUSING SECTOR FOR

96% OF FAMILIES AFFECTED BY **BEDROOM TAX**

THIS LEAVES THEM WITH TWO OPTIONS

1. FIND A SMALLER, BUT MORE EXPENSIVE PROPERTY IN THE PRIVATE RENTAL SECTOR, MEANING AN INCREASED HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIM, THEREFORE **BEDROOM TAX WORKS AS A PRIVATE LANDLORD SUBSIDY.**

2. STAY WHERE THEY ARE AND PAY UP, MEANING THAT **BEDROOM TAX WORKS AS A HOUSING TAX ON SOME OF THE POOREST FAMILIES IN SOCIETY.**

MOTHER ANGRY VOICE

Squeezing the vulnerable



- The weight of the cuts – falls heaviest on people already on very tight budgets (working families with children, the disabled)
- On average – households are £1,127 a year worse off
- Oxfam: *“The combination in the UK of economic stagnation and public spending cuts is causing substantial hardship to people living in poverty. This amounts to a “Perfect Storm” of falling incomes, rising prices, public service cuts, benefit cuts, a housing crisis and weak labour rights.”*

Material impact



- Squeezed households > significantly reducing spending on household essentials, esp. food and utility bills, to avoid falling into rent arrears.
- As shown by *A Qualitative Study of the Impact of the UK 'Bedroom Tax*, published in the *Journal of Public Health* > food was one of the first things cut back
 - more expensive food substituted for cheaper items
 - difficulty in affording fresh fruit and vegetables
 - reducing the quantity of food consumed by skipping meals > especially parents cutting out meals in order to provide for their children

Food banks

- One of the most powerful manifestations of austerity
- Set up in communities where food poverty was rare previously
- The claimants – not only unemployed people but also people in work who are underemployed or on low pay
- First shocking but now they are becoming the new normal
- Biggest paradox – David Cameron praised them as an example of „Big society“ – but critics say they represent nothing but a return to the Dickensian model of welfare



Other effects



- Fuel poverty - cutting back on heating, lighting and cooking in order to save on utility bills
- Homelessness (both rough sleeping and hidden homelessness) – 50% increase
- Increased dependence on high-interest loans obtained from “loan sharks” > families sink into debt
- Psychological impact – fear, anxiety, depression, isolation

Outcome of austerity

- Inequality is growing fast
> a large section of society is sinking into social exclusion and material deprivation unseen since Dickensian times

