



critical media project

Topic Overview: Class

have you ever wondered...

...whether your zip code, the technology you own, the kind of vacations you take, your mode of transportation, even the kind of food you eat are ways people see, identify and possibly judge you?

...how individuals that come from working class backgrounds are portrayed differently compared to their upper class counterparts in media?

...why so many characters in movies and TV shows as well as influencers on social media live in lavish houses, eat at expensive, trendy restaurants and wear designer clothing?

key concepts

- Class (also called social class or socio-economic class) refers to a system that groups or ranks individuals based on wealth. It is most simply defined by three strata: upper class, middle class, and working class.
- Except at the very extreme ends of the spectrum (very wealthy or very poor), socio-economic class can often come across as invisible. Yet, class is still an important factor in shaping who we are and what kinds of opportunities we're afforded.
- American history is permeated with the narrative of the "American Dream," which suggests that if we work hard enough, we can succeed, achieve, and move up the socio-economic ladder. Critics of this perspective point out that upward social and economic mobility has always been difficult in the United States.
- From the way individuals speak, to where they live, what they wear and what they drive, many of the messages that we receive about socio-economic class come to us through the media.

keywords

socio-economic class, mobility, exclusionist, meritocracy

the big picture

Portrayals of class in the media create meaning about a key facet of our identity. They also play an important role in the way we understand class in our history, our social institutions, and our everyday lives. Class (also called social class or socio-economic class) refers to a system that groups or ranks individuals based on wealth. It is most simply defined by three strata: upper class, middle class, and working class. These three basic class groupings have been further divided into multiple subsets that reflect smaller niche groupings (e.g. upper-middle class). Other labels used to identify a person's class can have specific meanings depending on the context in which they're used (bourgeois, white collar, blue collar, "white trash," etc.). The strata (and all the accompanying labels) designate not only one's own economic and social status, but also one's relationship to other classes above or below. The class system therefore is fundamentally hierarchical and generally exclusionist. Distinctions in class shed light on the opportunities individuals are afforded or denied.

Socio-economic class may not be the first thing we think of when we identify ourselves. We probably think of other things first: sex, race and ethnicity, even our nationality. Compared to some of these other more visible markers, class also can be more difficult to notice. Except at the very extreme ends of the spectrum (very wealthy or very poor), socio-economic class is often invisible. Yet, this invisibility does not make class any less important in shaping who we are and what kinds of opportunities we're afforded.

In the United States, a variety of historical narratives shape the way we understand socio-economic class. As Americans, we have been steeped in a history of egalitarianism, one that assumes all citizens are equal, everyone has equal opportunities, and anyone can become President. American history is permeated with American dream, rags-to-riches, and Horatio Alger myths that suggest if we work hard enough we can succeed, achieve, and move up the socio-economic ladder. Such thinking implies that class and class mobility are fluid and flexible, that changes in class are predicated on a system of meritocracy.

Meritocracy implies that your ability to move ahead professionally and financially is based on merit (ability, hard work) and your achievements. To simplify it: you get what you earn. The idea of meritocracy meshes well with the American dream—the idea that any person, no matter where they come from or who they are, can achieve anything if they just work hard enough. At the same time, meritocracy has been widely critiqued for a number of reasons and raises certain fundamental questions about access and opportunity: Should everything be based on merit, including education, health care and government services? Are there certain systemic and institutional obstacles that prevent certain people from achieving or demonstrating their merit?

Despite the fact that many of us believe in and hope for class mobility, we can still point to binaries that simplistically characterize and divide classes into a binary system.

upper class	working class
rich	poor
have	have-not
privileged	needy
hardworking	lazy
intelligent	ignorant
empowered	disempowered
clean	dirty
worthy	unworthy
financially independent	welfare dependent
powerful	powerless

These binaries do not mean that rich are superior to poor; rather they suggest that, in an American context, the attributes commonly associated with the upper classes, both in society and in the media, are valued above those associated with working classes, and that we carry with us many assumptions about what someone's class status means, and what it says about their character. These assumptions are further complicated when we add other facets of identity to class status, particularly race, ethnicity, and gender.

These values are not fixed, however. In fact, class identity is increasingly fluid and difficult to decipher because many of us can buy status symbols and surround ourselves with objects that mask our actual wealth. There are a few factors worth mentioning that have been key to this shift. With credit easily available, consumers are willing and able to buy what they cannot always afford, knowing that they can pay later (with interest). Globalization and outsourcing have made it easier for corporations to produce goods more cheaply. And, many of those same corporations and marketers have also recognized the brand consciousness and aspiration of consumers at different class strata and created tiered product lines.

class in everyday life

So, what does socio-economic class look like in our everyday lives, especially if, in many cases, it is hard to decipher?

Is it tied to our income and job, how much money we have in the bank or how much we can spend at the mall? Is it tied to our educational achievements? Is it tied to our lifestyle—the types of experiences and services we can afford? Is it about where we live? Is it about our taste and what we like?

Does everyone experience class the same way? Or do some feel its weight more significantly than others?

These are all important questions to consider as we think about what class means to us and to others we live with, work with, go to school with, or meet on the street.

Some may not think about class at all. You may buy whatever you want without thinking about the price. If something breaks, you simply buy a new and better version. You may take multiple vacations every year. You may travel outside the country (and have done so multiple times). You eat out regularly, and when you go grocery shopping you try to buy organic food, even if it's more expensive. You go to private schools and sleep-away camps. Your family belongs to members only clubs and gyms. You live in a gated community. You don't have to work summer jobs or take on jobs while going to school full-time. You had braces. You don't have to take public transportation.

For others, these are privileges, dreams, or simply beyond reach. You may not even think about another way of life because you've only known your own. You may need to cut coupons to pay for everyday expenses. You may drive a 15 year-old car that needs repairs you can't afford. You may have to take the bus everywhere. You may wear hand-me-down clothes. You may have been ridiculed for not wearing the latest styles. You may struggle to pay the rent. You may have had to skip a meal because there was not enough money for food in your house. You may eat fast food because it's cheaper. When you're sick, you may have to wait in long lines at a health clinic. You may have to apply for scholarships and financial aid, and accrue debt in order to afford your education.

Whether or not you can relate to any of these specific scenarios, you can probably find a way in which class plays a role in your everyday life. You may find yourself at one end or another of the class hierarchy, or more likely, somewhere in between, having some privileges and not others.

why it all matters... food for thought

In addition to pinpointing specific ways class impacts your everyday life, you can probably think of ways you've seen it represented in the media. Indeed, many of the messages that we receive about socio-economic class come to us through the media.

Think about the way individuals speak, where they live, what they wear, what they drive. And remember: just because we don't always see or talk about class doesn't mean that class is not still an important way in which identity is understood and constructed in our society. This is especially true in the media. As you look through the

media examples on this website, use them along with this overview as building blocks and avenues to dig deeper into this facet of identity and ask questions.

We might start by asking:

- How are different classes represented in entertainment, advertising, news, and social media?
- What specific images, words, and sounds contribute to our understanding of how a specific class is portrayed?
- Does the media make assumptions about what certain classes own, what they do for work, where they live?
- What impact do these representations and assumptions have on the opportunities and possibilities for real individuals of different classes in their personal and professional lives?