

Similarities and differences of the classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat

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The terms bourgeoisie and proletariat were both defined by Karl Marx and form part of the theory named after him. Simply put, the bourgeoisie are the people who own the means of production, and the proletariat are the workers who produce those goods. We might today refer to them as the 1% and the 99%, although without the heavy condemnation that Marxist theory bestows upon the bourgeoisie. Although people may still complain about the inequalities of the world, we feel that little can be done about it - and so the disparity remains. The main difference between the modern bourgeoisie and proletariat, though, is that the poor are in practical terms considerably better off than the deprived underclass that Marx wrote about.

Similarities between these two classes of people are inevitably scarce. We can hardly liken those in possession of power and money to the many who possess none of the former and little of the latter. It is arguably easier in the 21st century for one of the 99% to improve their situation and become one of the wealthy minority than it was in the 19th century; one has only to consider the self-made businessmen and reality stars who have become very wealthy. We have also seen the rise of the middle classes since Marx first developed his theories, although the economic crises of recent years have in some countries seen the middle class become increasingly impoverished in relative terms, as living costs soar and wages stagnate in real terms. So to some extent the sizeable gap remains; we might also refer to the 'haves' and 'have nots', further increasing this sense of difference between the two classes. In fact, by Marx's own definition it is virtually impossible to find any likeness between the two classes.

He held that throughout history, there was a class struggle where the ruling class inevitably oppressed the workers. The only thing that had changed from the earlier, pre-technological days where the privileged had oppressed the workers and peasants was the arrival of the middle class as industry enabled them to develop and flourish. Now, the conflict was between the middle class (the bourgeoisie) and the workers. For the proletariat, the only change was that their oppressors were no longer part of the ruling class. We have also seen that even the Marxist ideal of a Communist society was far from the utopian scenario that he envisaged, in which all citizens would be equal and that which each would receive would be “ according to his needs”. In practice, communist societies often saw considerable inequalities.

Those in the elite, or connected to someone in a position of power, often had access to privileges denied to most, such as superior accommodation, access to hard-currency shops, and summer homes. Anyone who was not a member of the Party was unlikely to enjoy any such luxuries. Thus a gulf still existed. In fact, some leaders lived in luxury unimaginable by their people. For example, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu owned an extraordinary fifteen palaces, and his pet dog was allegedly granted his own chauffeur-driven limousine and motorcade – at a time when ordinary Romanians were subjected to austerity and repression.

Therefore, it would be difficult to argue that the Communist ideal of equality imagined by Marx ever really existed. The capitalist bourgeoisie that he condemned to some extent transformed into the elite, with the people remaining in their role of the oppressed. The differences that he wrote about

in his manifesto still existed - and the gulf between the classes was as wide as ever, in spite of the illusion that the people were working for the greater good.