

Social class

[Politics](#), [Marxism](#)



social class, also called class, a group of people within a society who possess the same socioeconomic status. Besides being important in social theory, the concept of class as a collection of individuals sharing similar economic circumstances has been widely used in censuses and in studies of social mobility. - Early theories of class Theories of social class were fully elaborated only in the 19th century as the modern social sciences, especially sociology, developed. Political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau discussed the issues of social inequality and stratification, and French and English writers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries put forth the idea that the nonpolitical elements in society, such as the economic system and the family, largely determined a society's form of political life. This idea was taken farther by the French social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon, who argued that a state's form of government corresponded to the character of the underlying system of economic production. Saint-Simon's successors introduced the theory of the proletariat, or urban working class, as a major political force in modern society, directly influencing the development of Karl Marx's theory of class, which has dominated later discussion of the topic. Karl Marx's social theory of class For Marx, what distinguishes one type of society from another is its mode of production (i. e., the nature of its technology and division of labour), and each mode of production engenders a distinctive class system in which one class controls and directs the process of production while another class is, or other classes are, the direct producers and providers of services to the dominant class. The relations between the classes are antagonistic because they are in conflict over the appropriation of what is produced, and in certain

periods, when the mode of production itself is changing as a result of developments in technology and in the utilization of labour, such conflicts become extreme and a new class challenges the dominance of the existing rulers of society. The dominant class, according to Marx, controls not only material production but also the production of ideas; it thus establishes a particular cultural style and a dominant political doctrine, and its control over society is consolidated in a particular type of political system. Rising classes that gain strength and influence as a result of changes in the mode of production generate political doctrines and movements in opposition to the ruling class. The theory of class is at the centre of Marx's social theory, for it is the social classes formed within a particular mode of production that tend to establish a particular form of state, animate political conflicts, and bring about major changes in the structure of society. It is possible to distinguish four major approaches and a number of subapproaches, some of which cut across the major ones. They are ethnicity conceived as a primordial phenomenon, as an epiphenomenon, as a situational phenomenon, and as a purely subjective phenomenon. The primordialist approach is the oldest in sociological and anthropological literature. It argues that ethnicity is something given — ascribed at birth and deriving from the kin structure of human society — and hence more or less fixed and permanent. The other three approaches emerged in confutation of the primordialist view. The epiphenomenon interpretation is best represented by Michael Hechter's theory of internal colonialism and the cultural division of labour and to a lesser extent by the writings of Edna Bonacich. Hechter divides the economic structure of society into two sectors, the centre and the periphery. The

periphery consists of marginal jobs where the products are not unimportant to society, as, for example, in agricultural work, but which offer little in the form of compensation when compared to employment at the centre. It is this sector of the social structure that gives birth to ethnicity and the people concentrated in this peripheral labour area who become ethnic groups. They develop solidarity and maintain their own culture. Thus, as an epiphenomenon, ethnicity refers to minority groups only. It is something created and maintained by an uneven economy, a product of economic exploitation. The logic of the situational approach is based on the theory of rational choice. According to this interpretation, ethnicity is something that may be relevant in some situations but not in others. Individuals may choose to be regarded as members of an ethnic group if they find it to their advantage. Perhaps the best examples of this approach are found in the work of Michael Banton, Daniel Bell, and Jeffrey Ross. Banton sees it as a rational choice for an individual in any circumstance, while Bell and Ross emphasize the political advantage of the choice of ethnic membership. Thus, for Ross, ethnicity is “ a group option in which resources are mobilized for the purpose of pressuring the political system to allocate public goods for the benefit of the members of a self-differentiating collectivity. ” In more general terms, it refers to the actor’s pliant assumption of ethnic identity in order to organize the meaning of his social relationships within the requirements of variously structured situations. This approach appears to have been particularly popular in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. Perhaps the most interesting of the four approaches is the subjective one, which sees ethnicity as essentially a socio-psychological reality or a matter of perception of “ us”

and “ them” in contradistinction to something given, which exists objectively, as it were, “ out there. ” This interpretation does not mean that subjectivists reject all objective aspects of ethnicity; some give them significant attention. But they tend to make them dependent on the socio-psychological experience. Two factors have stimulated the emergence of the subjectivist approach in the study of ethnicity during the past twenty years. First, Fredrik Barth’s seminal work on ethnic group boundaries, published in 1969, had a strong influence on both anthropologists and sociologists. Secondly, in American and Canadian scholarship the approach has been spurred by empirical studies of ethnic generations, particularly the third. Barth himself took a rather extreme position: for practical purposes, he jettisoned culture from the concept of ethnicity. Ethnic boundaries for him were psychological ones, and ethnic culture and its content were irrelevant. An ethnic group thus was the result of group relations in which the boundaries were established through mutual perceptions and not by means of any objectively distinct culture. A less extreme position has been that of the “ symbolic ethnicity” approach as formulated by Herbert Gans. The idea here is that ethnicity is not what it used to be: it has lost its practical everyday value and has survived at a purely symbolic level, at which it works to identify people who otherwise are acculturated and assimilated into a different, predominantly urban, American culture and society. Another subjectivist approach to the study of ethnicity — one that appears to be connected with the postmodernist movement in contemporary thought — is constructionism. It is represented by the work of William Yancey, Michael Moerman, Susan Smith, Hanna Herzog, and to some extent Jonathan Okamura and Wsevolod

Isajiw. Theoretically, this approach lies somewhere between Michel Foucault's emphasis on construction of the metaphor and Pierre Bourdieu's notions of practice and habitus as the basic factors shaping the structure of all social phenomena. The essential concept in this approach is that ethnicity is something being negotiated and constructed in everyday living. It is a process that continues to unfold and has much to do with the exigencies of survival. It is constructed in the course of feeding, clothing, schooling, and conversing with the family and others. < previous up next > - Printer-friendly version