

# Working Class : four definitions

**Oxford English Dictionary:** The grade or grades of society employed for wages to do manual or industrial work.

**Basil Bernstein:** The class of people who take no apprenticeship or other course of training or education after compulsory school leaving age.

**All-embracing:** The class of all those who will permit the term working class to be applied to themselves.

**Ideological:** Not any category of people, but a collection of political ideas, or an (imagined) army dedicated to putting political ideas into effect.

'WORKING Class' sounds like an occupational category, the class of those who work, who may be either oppressed or free. But according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term 'working class' or 'working classes' has been used since the early nineteenth century to mean the 'grade or grades of society . . .' not an occupational category but a social rank, oppressed by definition. There are the upper classes, the middle classes, and the working and destitute classes who together make up the lower orders.

Eddie Shaw, the great Glasgow anarchist orator, defined 'work' as the occupation by which the working class is identified, 'something you don't like doing, but you have to do it to live'. Himself a sheet metal worker by trade, he did not see the practice of his craft as work, except when he would rather be doing something else. He emancipated himself from work (as he defined it) and from the working class (*OED* definition) by becoming a self-employed panel beater, supplying a service to garages.

*Freedom* has always numbered working class people (*OED* definition) among its readers, writers, and (often) editors. A questionnaire sent to *Freedom* subscribers in 1960 included questions about work, and of those who actually responded,

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Researchers in China claim to have developed a breathalysing device which automatically turns on a vehicles' rear view lights after detecting alcohol on the drivers' breath. This sounds ingenious, but, presumably, many such offences occur after dark anyway.

The Zimbabwe government last year sacked 173 teachers from state schools, most for having love affairs with their pupils. Most of the other cases were for stealing school funds.

some 20% (96 out of 470) stated occupations which are unequivocally working class. To judge from the answers on education, many of those in middle class occupations like journalist and teacher came from working class families and had taken the opportunity of social mobility through education.

There is a 'moral explanation' of social rank, which was dropped in this country about the Second World War, but is still used by the privileged in some other countries. Working class people, it is said, are poor and oppressed by reason of being feckless, indolent, and dishonest. (Norman Tebbit's 'on yer bike' speech may appear to revive this explanation in the case of the unemployed.) Prudence, energy, and general saintliness were never very evident among the rich, but the Victorians could point to some notable examples of people who had started in the working class and risen in rank by their personal qualities, such as the statesman Benjamin Franklin (an American statesman but he served his craft apprenticeship in England), the paternalist model employer Titus Salt, and the scientist Michael Faraday. Even the Scottish-American scoundrel Andrew Carnegie was said to have made his millions by honest hard work. Such examples were used to 'prove' that people could better their status if they tried; the need for opportunity, as well as personal quality, was overlooked.

In the Empire, of course, there was an additional barrier to advancement, which was that the working class had darker skins than the upper and middle classes. Some thought this difference was not only in the colonies. The gentleman who was made responsible for soldiers' welfare in World War One was taken to a French brewery, where the disused vats had been filled with warm water and hundreds of soldiers were bathing; bemused, he remarked that he 'had not known the lower orders to have such pale skins'.

More recently the moral explanation of rank was replaced by a genetic explanation. Working class people, it was believed, not in all cases but on average, were intellectually inferior to middle class people by reason of their hereditary constitutions. Many contributed to the idea, but today it is remembered as largely the work of Professor Sir Cyril Burt, who could assess a person's IQ in a short conversation, using 'experience'. As it later turned out, he had an intuition the people with expensive suits and posh voices were more intelligent than people with flat caps and regional accents, and supported his intuition by means of invented data.

Largely at Burt's suggestion, the '11-plus' scheme was adopted by some progressive local education authorities in the 1930s, and over the whole country after the war. Children of those wealthy enough to pay school fees were assumed to be clever enough to benefit from education. Children at state schools were divided by examination at the age of eleven, into a minority of clever ones and a majority of thickies who were sent to 'Secondary Modern Schools' where they were taught to be useful. Of course, not all children in the state primary schools were poor. Richer pupils, if they were found to be clever by examination, would move up with the clever poor to the state grammar school. If, on the other hand, they were found to be thick, they could transfer to a fee-paying school and be clever that way.

The theory behind the 11-plus contradicted everyone's anecdotal experience. Every teacher could see a wide range of ability in the school they knew personally, whether it was Eton or Bash Street. But Burt's con was so successful, most thinking people assumed the schools they knew were statistical exceptions to the general rule. A writer in *Freedom*, arguing for social equality, pointed out the fact of the middle classes being more intelligent did not mean their needs were greater than those of the working class. A lecture to the London Anarchist Group complained that the 11-plus system was depressing the working class by robbing it of its intelligent members. I thought at the time the speaker had a cheek, because I had passed the 11-plus exam, whereas he had run away in his youth from a boarding school where the fees per pupil were more than my father's wages.

Few people now believe in 'intelligence genes', except for wealthy thickies consoling themselves with their class superiority for their individual stupidity.

The *OED* definition of the working class is still the only one in many contemporary dictionaries, but several other meanings have come into use since the *OED* was published. One of these is a prescriptive definition by the social psychologist Basil Bernstein. A prescriptive definition is where a writer says 'When I use the term working class (or whatever) in this work I shall mean so-and-so'; it is distinct from a dictionary definition, where people use a term undefined and the dictionary writer has to analyse what they intend by it.

Bernstein identified two modes of speech, 'elaborated code' where one mentions what one is talking about, and 'restricted code' where one assumes the

audience knows what one is talking about. He also identified two ways of persuading children to do as adults wish, 'rational control' by which the child is given explanations, and 'positional control' in which the child is simply required simply to obey. For reasons I do not know, he wanted to say working class people only use restricted code and positional control.

He was a London University teacher in the 1960s. Some of his students would have been children of working class parents (*OED* definition) and would have advised him that working class people are quite articulate. Rather than abandon his thesis, however, he sought to make it true by redefining the working class. It must have appeared that all his pupils of working class origin had parents who had served apprenticeships, so he defined the working class as those who have never undergone apprenticeships or other training or education after compulsory school leaving age. (Of course I am guessing what went on in Bernstein's mind and my apologies if I have got it wrong.)

Even with the new definition, Bernstein's thesis is contradicted by experience. But the definition itself should be included in modern dictionaries as an alternative to the *OED* definition, because it corresponds to what many people mean when they speak of the working class without defining it. Furthermore, it identifies an important social class, roughly corresponding to Marx's 'Lumpenproletariat', the people who for whatever reason do not have the benefit

of education and training.

These days the need for 'manual and industrial' workers is shrinking and the need for educated people growing in the advanced economies. It is possible through education to get out of the working class (*OED* definition) but the working class (Bernstein's definition) are stuck, barring some unlikely event like a big pools win. Ill-paid, in stressful jobs and most liable to unemployment, they are the most oppressed of the able-bodied in our society, and so numerous that a social revolution is unthinkable without them.

We know many of our readers are working class (*OED* definition) but we doubt if many regularly take the *Sun*, which is the main daily paper of the working class (Bernstein's definition). The *Sun's* only policy is to maximise sales, but in passing it promotes patriotism, royalism, xenophobia, and the lie that anarchism is mere destructiveness.

A person who detested school because of its longwindedness (it is not the only reason for detesting school but it is one), is unlikely to be diverted from the *Sun* by a long-winded article like this for instance. I do not suggest changing *Freedom's* aim; our target audience is also important. But we should commend our contemporary *Class War* for trying, at least, to present anarchism to the *Sun* type of reader.

The all-embracing, fuzzy-at-the-edges definition of the working class is quite recent. George Orwell in the 1930s expressed his sympathy and respect for the working class by wearing a cloth cap and hobnail boots for his job as a BBC

researcher, but he would not have classified himself as working class because of his particular job. These days, a person of his sympathies would not hesitate to call himself working class; if challenged, he could call on some definition of the working class such as those who lived by selling their labour, and say that it is how he lives. I think the fashion was started by people like me, children of working class families who managed to become teachers, advertising designers, one-person businesses and other kinds of people traditionally regarded as middle class, but wanted to identify with their roots. Sympathetic people of middle class origin, in the same kinds of occupation, then had the option of calling themselves working class if they wanted to. A harmless affectation, so long as we all know what is happening.

Finally, there is a usage of the term 'working class' which does not refer to any category of people at all, but to a category of ideas or the pursuit of those ideas. An actual example of this usage, from a little pamphlet called *Capitalism and its Revolutionary Destruction, a statement by Wildcat*, goes as follows: 'At all times – before, during, and for as long as is necessary after the revolution – the working class must be prepared to use whatever violence necessary to drive its struggle forward and seal its victory. To those who deplore the need for bloodshed, we reply: there is no alternative.'

This means roughly that the ideological army must fight until the anonymous author's aspirations have been achieved.

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