

America's Working Class Majority

An Exclusive Excerpt from the New Book by Michael Zweig

The conventional view of class in the United States today is easily summarized: it doesn't exist. In his provocative new book, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, Michael Zweig challenges that view. He argues that social classes and class relations in the United States not only continue to exist but exert tremendous influence over all of us. Zweig, a professor of economics at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, explores aspects of class that are usually overlooked or denied, especially the way classes are structured by economic power. The book makes three basic points: First, economic classes exist in U.S. society. He describes who is in them, measures their sizes, and concludes that we are a mostly working class society. Second, class has a pervasive impact on the way we live, work, and think. A wide range of important issues can be better understood when we look at them from a class-based viewpoint. Third, class has great influence on politics -- electoral politics and the more general contests of power that operate throughout society. By looking at issues through the lens of class, we can be clearer about what is at stake, and begin to see the potential for profound political realignments at the start of the twenty-first century.

Despite the near-exclusive media focus on our supposedly vast middle class, working class identity continues to be surprisingly widespread in the United States. As recently as 1996, a majority of Americans responding to a *New York Times* poll identified themselves as members of the working class rather than the middle class. In his book's first chapter, excerpted here, Zweig shows that this is remarkably close to the actual class composition of the labor force today.

I first learned about class growing up in Detroit and its suburbs. Long before I knew what classes were, I experienced them. Before I had the words and concepts, I saw for myself profound differences in different parts of town. I went to grade school and junior high in Detroit with the children of auto workers. For high school, my classmates were children of top auto executives in suburban Bloomfield Hills. My parents had found a house in one of the first subdivisions in the area, a corner of one of the finest public school districts in Michigan, where huge estates stood in sharp contrast to the housing I had known before. Other differences soon emerged. The auto plants closed on the first day of deer season so thousands of workers could head into the woods of northern Michigan, but families in Bloomfield Hills took their kids hunting for moose in northern Canada or on safari to Africa. A young teenager I knew in Detroit who killed an old woman was put away, but a small group of my new classmates who beat a truck driver to death by the side of the road on a lark received barely two weeks' social probation at school. Whether we are aware of it or not, even where we don't have the words to explain it, the American experience is an experience of intense class difference.

A population as large and diverse as ours contains many divides. In recent decades, we have arrived at better understandings of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, helping us to make progress toward overcoming discrimination. But as public awareness of these issues has developed, knowledge of class differences has all but disappeared. It wasn't always so. At the end of the nineteenth and far into the twentieth centuries, newspapers were filled with stories of pitched class struggle. General strikes. The army called out to put down rebellious workers. Mass picketing and factory occupations in the course of union organizing drives. In cartoons, fat capitalist plutocrats with cigars in their mouths and dollar signs for eyes were denounced as enemies of the common man.

More recently, the general view is that class, if it ever was important, is a thing of the past. No one argues that capitalism is a thing of the past, of course. Instead, we often hear that the relative decline of manufacturing and the tremendous growth of service industries have changed the basic facts of life in capitalist society. The relative decline of blue-collar factory employment and the rise of white-collar service jobs is supposed to show that the working class is history. The fact that we no longer see pitched battles between masses of workers and squads of armed goons hired by the company to kill the union organizers is taken as proof that class struggle is over, that we've outgrown that sordid past. In short, the conventional wisdom is that post-industrial society is not industrial society.

True. But also not true. Life in the United States today is dramatically different from life thirty or sixty or a hundred years ago; many of the changes do correspond with changes in the economy. Yet much remains the same. A telephone operator today can tell you stories of speed-up and harassment by supervisors that equal anything reported by her grandfather who worked on the auto assembly line. And both are just as adamant about union representation. A temp services bookkeeper today is as subject to the whims of his employer as was the garment worker at the turn of the twentieth century. The political power of the economic elite today is at least as great as it was in the 1920s, and perhaps even greater, since it is less effectively challenged by other class interests. And while service jobs have certainly grown as a share of the labor force, nearly 2 million more people were working to produce goods (in mining, manufacturing, and construction) in 1998 as there were in 1970, 25 million people.¹

Despite all the changes in the economy, it remains as true today as it was forty and eighty years ago that the majority of Americans are working class people. To see this clearly, we first need to understand what classes make up modern capitalist society. The way to do that is to assess power. Class is about the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result. This way of approaching class is different from looking at income or status or lifestyle. When Americans do talk about class, these are the measures that usually come up, and for good reason. The working class does have different income, status, and lifestyles from those of the middle class and capitalist class. But if we leave the matter there, we miss the basic reason that classes exist in the first place.

Classes are groups of people connected to one another, and made different from one another, by the ways they interact when producing goods and services. This production process is based in the workplace, but extends into the political and cultural dynamics of society as well, where the rules and expectations that guide the economy are laid down, largely in accord with the needs of the economically powerful. Class is not a box that we "fit" into, or not, depending on our own personal attributes. Classes are not isolated and self-contained. What class we are in depends upon the role we play, as it relates to what others do, in the complicated process in which goods and services are made. These roles carry with them different degrees of income and status, but their most fundamental feature is the different degrees of power each has. The heart of class is not about lifestyle. It is about economics.

Clearly, it makes a difference whether you own the factory or are a hired hand. It makes a difference whether you are the CEO at the bank or the technician who repairs the ATMs. The chief difference is a difference of power: power to determine and control the processes that go on in the factory and the bank, and beyond that, power in the larger society, especially political power.

Power is complicated; it has many sources and is exercised in many ways. Some people have the power to determine which goods and services will be made, how and by whom. Some set government policy and use the government to control others, through the police, through regulations, through the military. Others have cultural power to shape which ideas and values tend to dominate our thinking. Elections involve still another type of power. A person with power in one of these parts of life doesn't necessarily have power in another. But power isn't random, either. We can find patterns in the exercise of power, spill-over from one area of society to another. Economic and political power are related and reinforce one another. The power to affect our culture comes from control over economic and political resources, but influencing the culture tends to strengthen one's economic and political power as well.

Some power is obvious, but other kinds of power are easy to miss. The power of inertia tends to perpetuate existing ways of doing things and existing relationships. We aren't necessarily aware, day to day, of the power that limits alternatives, the power of a kind of social automatic pilot, invisible as long as everyone goes along with the program. Invisible force fields of power are built into the structures that hold society together, giving it shape, setting the paths for our opportunity, and setting the limits as well. We tend to take these contours for granted, internalize them, think of them as the natural order. But when some group of people seriously challenges this kind of power, in politics, in the culture, in assertions of new ways to organize the economy, what had been invisible roars into full view: "the powers that be" step out to demolish the threat.

Classes arise in these relationships of social power, visible and invisible. Class is first and foremost a product of power asserted in the production process. This means power over what goes on at work: who will do which tasks at what pace for what pay, and the power to decide what to produce, how to produce it, and where to sell it. But beyond that, production power involves setting the rules for how markets work and the laws governing property rights. Production power includes organizing an educational system that will generate a workforce with the skills and work habits required to keep production going. Production power extends into many aspects of our lives beyond the job.

We will see shortly that the majority of the population in the United States belongs to the working class. The working class does not exist in isolation, of course; it draws its existence from its relationship to other classes, other people also engaged in making and distributing goods and services. First and foremost among these other classes is the capitalist class, those who own and operate the major corporations. What is important about capitalists is not simply that they own all that is made in their factories and offices. They have the power to control the work lives of their employees, most of whom are working class people. Their economic power finds its way into enormous influence in politics as well.

In a capitalist society, the "powers that be" are largely the capitalists. For the most part, capitalists set the terms of production, in all the senses just described, and more. They own the businesses, so, of course, they have the power to make the rules. And, owning the businesses, they have the money and social status, and, with these, power to influence the political and cultural life of the country. Their influence tends to define everyone's opportunities and limits according to what will be good for capitalists, what will continue, broaden, and deepen their power. Sometimes this power is visible; when it is not, it just is, baked in the cake.

When I talk about the working class, on the other hand, I am talking about people who share a common situation in these social structures, but one without much power. To be in the working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability -- on the job, in the market, in politics and culture. On the job, most workers have little control over the pace and content of their work. They show up, a supervisor shows them the job, and they do it. The job may be skilled or unskilled, white collar or blue collar, in any one of thousands of occupations. Whatever the particulars, most jobs share a basic powerlessness in relation to the authority of the owner and the owner's representatives who are there to supervise and control the workforce.

The same conflicts continue even in companies where workers have employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs). The employees at United Airlines, for example, are part-owners of the company through an ESOP imposed when the company was in trouble. But that didn't turn the workers into capitalists, or even make them any less working class in the power they exert. As evidence, in July 1998, 19,000 reservation takers, gate agents, and ticket sellers voted to join a union, the International Association of Machinists, when the company they "own" continued to treat them as the workers they in fact continued to be.²

Occasionally, workers really do own, operate, and control the company where they work. These worker cooperatives can offer some relief from the arrogance of power often found among managers in regular businesses. But worker cooperatives are typically small and have little market power. Workers in these co-ops exercise none of the broader social power that the middle and capitalist classes have. Overall, they find themselves in the same social position as other workers. Workers don't need to hold stock in the company they work for to have an interest in its economic health. Their jobs, pay, and working conditions are wrapped up with the health of the company. But just because workers want their employers to stay in business doesn't make the workers capitalists. After all, employers want workers to have affordable housing so the company won't have to pay high wages to support high rent. But we don't conclude from this shared interest that employers are workers.

Capitalists and workers are not the only classes in America. There is also a middle class, made up of professional people, supervisors and managers, and small business owners. We will see that it makes sense to put some people who are technically capitalists, those who own small businesses, into the middle class rather than the capitalist class, because of the very real differences in power that separate large and small business.

To understand class, we need to measure it. This is hard to do, because class is not a simple category. But we can get close to the structure of classes by looking at the structure of occupations. The jobs we do give a strong indication of the place we occupy, on the job and off, in the class structure. Although I have measured class by looking at the labor force, people not in the labor force are also in classes. Non-working spouses typically share the class position of their working mate. Children share the class position of their parents, and retired people typically retain the class standing they had in their working life. The relative sizes of different classes in the labor force closely reflect the class composition of society as a whole.

The Capitalist Class

Before looking at the working class, let's look at the capitalists, the class with whom workers are most directly engaged. Capitalists and their managers own and control businesses of all sizes. In a strict sense, *anyone* who makes a living by owning a business is a capitalist, even if she employs only a couple of people, even if he is self-employed and has no one working for him. But it makes sense to distinguish between big and small capitalists, to recognize the difference in power they have over their workers, in the market and in the political arena. Ross Perot and David Rockefeller don't belong in the same class as the guy who has a small plumbing business and employs an occasional helper when work is steady. In 1995 (the latest year for which these data are available), 22.5 million businesses existed in the United States. Most were small, even tiny. About 60 percent of businesses had less than \$25,000 in gross receipts, and all these very small businesses put together, 13.3 million of them, took in just 0.5 percent of all business revenue. Seventy percent of all businesses had no employees at all except for the owner.³

On the other end of the scale are the incorporated businesses, or corporations. Even most of these are on the small side. Of the nearly 4.3 million corporations operating in 1994, only 18 percent, 766,000 companies, had gross receipts above a million dollars. But the receipts going to this 18 percent added up to 94 percent of all corporate receipts that year.⁴

I call any business "small" if its owner works side by side with the employees and supervises them directly. This owner is in the middle class. The business becomes big and the owner a member of the capitalist class only when the owner no longer works directly with the workers, exercises control over the workforce through at least one layer of middle management, and becomes occupied full-time with running the business as a senior strategist and source of authority, largely removed from the production process itself. There is no hard and fast rule to separate these types of businesses, but experience suggests that 20 employees is a reasonable cutoff, beyond which a small business becomes big. By this measure, there were 881,000 big businesses in the United States in 1995, each employing 20 or more people. These were only 13 percent of all businesses that had any employees beyond the owner, but they had 75 percent of all employees and accounted for 77 percent of the country's nongovernment payroll.⁵ The owners and top managers of these companies form the capitalist class. They are no more than 2 percent of the labor force. Most of these businesses are big fish in small ponds, holding sway in a local area but wielding little market or political power on a national or even regional scale.

In 1995, by the standards of the Small Business Administration, there were only 16,000 "big businesses" (with 500 or more employees) in the United States. Yet they employed 20 percent of all business employees, and paid over a quarter of the country's private payroll.⁶ We can reasonably consider these 16,000 big businesses to be the national economic elite. Their directors and senior officers exercise considerable power, not only within the companies they control but in the larger society, which is affected by their decisions and opinions on strategies for investment, collective bargaining, and foreign affairs.

Even within this elite, power is concentrated in the very largest financial, manufacturing, service, and transportation companies. At the end of 1998, the twenty-five largest commercial banks had assets ranging from \$32 billion (Union Bank of California) to \$317 billion (Nationsbank). They were only 0.3 percent of all commercial banks, but this tiny fraction controlled 46.9 percent of all commercial bank assets in the country. In manufacturing, the 1,324 largest corporations, though accounting for less than 0.5 percent of all manufacturing firms, took in 71 percent of all manufacturing corporations' 1995 revenues.

We can identify 200,000 or so individuals who together constitute the governing boards of national-scale corporations. They are the "captains of industry" who dominate the U.S. economy, the two-tenths of one percent of the private sector workforce who are the core of the capitalist class. From among these directors, a few tens of thousands sit on two or more boards and form a pattern of interlocking directorships among the major banks and non-financial corporations. This network, together with the top-level political and cultural leaders aligned with it, can fairly be called the "ruling class."⁷ Its members have substantial power but, like all classes, the ruling class is not a monolithic unit and it is not all-powerful. The ruling class is limited by competition among corporations and by the organized power of other classes, both within the United States and abroad. Its members also have factional disputes among themselves, regional differences and differences based on the interests of specific industries. But they have enough coherence of interest and outlook, and enough similarities to differentiate them from the rest of society, that we can identify a ruling class within the larger capitalist class. The entire U.S. ruling class could easily be seated in Yankee Stadium, which holds 57,000 people.

The Middle Class

Understanding the structure and size of the capitalist class helps us to understand the middle class. "The middle class" is under constant discussion in American political life. As the working class has disappeared from polite conversation, the middle class has come to be accepted as the social position most Americans are in. Politicians appeal to the middle class. Tax cuts are designed for the middle class. Downsizing afflicts the middle class. Even union leaders almost always refer to their members as middle class. Most people think of the middle class in terms of income and lifestyle. In short, the middle class has a middling income. Its members are not the rich, who are a fringe group of celebrities and business millionaires; nor are they the poor, the fringe at the bottom of society who are chronically unemployed, on welfare, outside the mainstream, "the underclass." The middle class are those people who, in Bill Clinton's phrase, "work hard and play by the rules," going to work every day just to get by.

Let's ask: What is the middle class in the middle of? If we answer this question in terms of power instead of income, we see that the middle class is in between the two great social forces in modern society, the working class and the capitalist class. These two classes are connected at work, in the production of goods and services. But they have sharply opposing interests, in production and in politics. The middle class is caught in the middle of these conflicting roles and interests. In the context of the sharp conflicts that arise between labor and capital, the middle class is caught in the crossfire. A look at the lives of small business owners, supervisors, and professional people will help make the point clear.

There can be no better example of the traditional middle class professional than the family doctor. Traditionally a person of authority and independence, the doctor at work is clearly removed from the work life of the secretary or mill hand. The doctor's class standing is not directly a result of the years of training required. A skilled machinist or auto mechanic can take years to train, too. The doctor is different from the machinist because no one tells the doctor what to do. The doctor is in control, of her time and effort as well as the treatment of her patients.

That is, until recently. Now that HMOs have brought cost control, reengineering, and corporate management practices to the medical sector, doctors are increasingly subject to a discipline and control unknown in their ranks in the entire history of the profession. Managed care was supposed to be a way to "bring competition to the health industry." What that has actually meant is the penetration of big business and capitalist methods into the medical work process, in the doctor's office as well as the hospital. Under this regime, doctors are increasingly being changed into -- many would say, "reduced to" -- employees, more like skilled craftsmen, less like independent agents. In response, some doctors are turning to unions for protection. To some extent they are concerned about their incomes. But in most of these unionization efforts, the real spur driving doctors to unions is the question of power and autonomy in their work life.

Public school teaching is another profession caught in the middle. We can see this in the approach the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have taken in recent years to pressure for school reform. These unions have insisted that teachers should play a central role in guiding curriculum reforms and other changes in school operations. In doing so, the unions are trying to preserve the professional status of their members, to distinguish the work life of the teacher from the experience of the cafeteria worker or janitor. The idea is to avoid a situation in which the school board, principal, or curriculum consulting firm decides what should be taught in each class and what teaching methods should be used, and then hires teachers only to tell them, "Here's the job. Now go do it." In some school systems, teachers are treated more like workers; in others they are treated more like college teachers in their authority.

School teachers, fighting for authority, are caught between pressures from school boards wanting to apply corporate management strategies to control their work, on the one hand, and a reluctance to identify too closely with unions and the working class, who are seen as unprofessional. At the same time, teachers face increasingly impatient demands from working class parents that their children get a better education. It has always been true that the process by which professional people are brought into the working class is not smooth. It involves intense conflict. In fact, the tensions that arise in professional and entrepreneurial life within capitalism are part of what makes these positions middle class in the first place. This is why doctors and teachers belong to the middle class despite their attraction to unions, and the militancy they occasionally display in strikes or other job actions characteristic of working class people.

Some teachers, social workers, and other professionals I place in the middle class already think of themselves as workers. Others resist any association with people who are not professional and identify more closely with the capitalist class in their values and political leanings. In politics, as in economics, people in the middle class are in the middle, more or less strongly identifying themselves with labor or with capital, depending on their particular situation and depending on the relative power of working class movements compared with the power capitalists can demonstrate.

The Working Class

The working class is large and diverse. Pursuing our economic approach to class, we can get a picture of it by looking carefully at the occupational structure of the U.S. economy. But the specific work of the job is not the only question to consider. Since class is a matter of relationships and power, not job title, a person with the same job will be in one or another class depending on the circumstances of the work. A truck driver who owns his own rig, for example, is in the middle class as a small entrepreneur, but a truck driver employed by a freight shipper is in the working class. A plumber operating as an independent contractor counts in the middle class, but the same plumber working for someone else is in the working class.

After examining U.S. Labor Department data on the detailed occupational content of each job title in each category, I have assigned employees to the working class or to the middle and capitalist class according to the degree of authority and independence the employee typically has on the job. The results are shown in Table 1.

For example, in 1996 15.4 million people were employed in sales occupations. Of these, 4.5 million are supervisors and proprietors and therefore belong in the middle class. The 2.9 million retail cashiers, on the other hand, all belong in the working class. Another 4.9 million retail and personal services sales workers -- sales assistants in shops and stores -- are also in the working class. But stock traders and real estate agents, also counted by the Department of Labor in the broad "sales" category, have enough authority and independence to be counted in the middle class. By going through each occupation in the sales category in this way, I conclude that of these 15.4 million people, 6.8 million are in the working class, and 8.6 million in the middle class.

Table 1 shows that service occupations are overwhelmingly working class. These include firefighters, dental assistants and nursing aides, private guards and police officers, hairdressers and cosmetologists, janitors, and waiters. But service occupations also include some middle class positions such as supervisors and restaurant chefs (though not short-order cooks, who are typically working class).

The professional specialty category divides the other way: only 8 percent are working class. People counted as professionals hold such jobs as engineers (not technicians), computer scientists (not computer operators), schoolteachers (not aides), doctors, lawyers, university professors, and the like. These are middle class people, given the degree of independence and authority they typically have at work. But this broad category also includes some working class people. For example, the Department of Labor includes respiratory, speech, and physical therapists among professional specialists. Given the specifics of these jobs and their place in the medical treatment system, I think it is appropriate to count these therapists as highly trained and skilled working class people, even with their professional qualifications, except when they are self-employed.

Of the remaining six occupational categories, four are fairly homogeneous, two are mixed. The “executive, administrative, and managerial” category includes no working class people. These are such jobs as property managers, financial managers, and educational administrators. At the other extreme, all “operators, fabricators, and laborers” are working class -- machine operators, bus and truck drivers (other than self-employed), freight and stock handlers, equipment cleaners, and so on. Almost all the administrative support personnel are working class: secretaries, information clerks, file clerks and other records processing occupations, postal clerks and mail carriers, computer equipment operators, and teacher aides, among others. The middle class is found among the supervisors

In addition to those working in 1996, the labor force included 7.2 million unemployed people who were actively looking for work but had no job of any kind. Data are available showing the last-held occupation of the unemployed.⁸ Not surprisingly, the unemployed tend to be from those occupational groups with a larger concentration of working class jobs. If we assume that the unemployed in each occupational group have the same class composition as those who are working in that occupational group, we find that 75 percent of the unemployed are working class people.

Once each occupational group is analyzed and separated into working class and middle class jobs, it is a simple matter to add up the pieces and find the total class composition of the labor force. In 1996, the labor force numbered 133.9 million people (employed or unemployed but actively looking for work). Of these, 82.8 million were working class; 51.1 million were middle class and above. In other words, the working class is 62 percent of the labor force. This is why I say we live in a country with a working class majority.

It may seem surprising that so many people are in the working class, given the declining relative size of manufacturing in the U.S. economy. But images of the working class too closely identified with goods-producing blue collar workers miss the point. Only 21 percent of people counted by the Department of Labor as “nonsupervisory employees” in the non-farm private sector are in goods-producing industries (mining, construction, and manufacturing).⁹ Over 70 percent of all private sector nonsupervisory employees hold white collar jobs in wholesale and retail trade, finance, insurance, and real estate, and a wide variety of business, personal, and health-related service industries.¹⁰ But even in 1950, in the heyday of American manufacturing strength, no more than a third of the nonagricultural workforce was employed in manufacturing.¹¹

Old images of the working class need correction in other ways, too. Identifying the working class with factories may foster the notion that “working class” means men, or even just white men. Think again: less than half the working class labor force, about 46 percent, are white men. Minorities have always been an integral part of the working class, a good number of women have always worked in factories, and today women are a slightly higher percentage of the working class workforce than they are of the labor force as a whole. In 1996, women were 46.2 percent of the employed workforce. Sorting through the data by detailed occupational category to look at gender composition, I find that women were 47.4 percent of the working class, and 43.5 percent of the middle class.¹²

But this does not mean that women have broken out of traditional job categories in a big way. Women are still grossly underrepresented in the more skilled blue collar jobs that traditionally have been held by men. In 1996 women held 24 percent of the working class jobs among operators, fabricators, and laborers, but only 9 percent of the working class jobs among precision production, craft, and repair workers. At the other extreme, women held 87 percent of working class jobs in the professional specialties (these were mainly nurses), 80 percent of working class jobs doing administrative support, and 65 percent of working class jobs in sales.

In the middle class also, women tended to work in the traditional female occupations. Women held fewer than 4 percent of middle class positions in precision production, craft, and repair -- they are not often supervisors or independent contractors in these lines of work. Women were also underrepresented among middle class positions in sales (37 percent) and services (38 percent). In executive, administrative, and managerial positions, women held their share of jobs, as they did in middle class positions among technicians. Women may be relatively over-represented among managers compared with men in some occupations, but that doesn't mean that women have broken any glass ceilings. In no occupational category except farming did women constitute as large a percentage of managers as they did among the working class in that occupation.

If we look at racial and ethnic composition, we see that blacks and Hispanics are over-represented in the working class and underrepresented in the middle class, patterns similar to women, but even more pronounced. In 1996, blacks were 10.7 percent of the

total employed labor force, but they were 12.6 percent of the working class and only 7.8 percent of the middle class. Hispanics were 9.2 percent of all those with jobs, but held only 5.3 percent of middle class positions and 11.3 percent of working class jobs. (Unfortunately, data for Asian and other minorities are not available.)

We see from all these numbers that women, blacks, and Hispanics are a larger proportion of the working class than they are of the labor force as a whole. They are by no means absent from middle class positions of authority, but, in general, women and minorities are in the lower-paid sections of the working class and in the lower ranks of management and professional life, compared with men or white people. Following this pattern, women and minorities are also found among the capitalists, but their businesses are small by national standards. The largest black-owned business in 1998 had sales under \$400 million.¹³

If we look at the class structure of the United States, then, we see that neither the working nor the middle class is uniform in gender, racial, or ethnic composition. Each class presents a mosaic. Looking at the mosaic another way, we see that gender, racial, and ethnic groups are also not uniform. Each is divided by class. This complex set of relationships and identities is what we have to sort through to make sense of and then influence the politics and economics of U.S. society.

Class Ambiguities

The majority of people are in the working class, those who do the direct work of production and who typically have little control over their jobs and no supervisory authority over others. The working class is the clear majority of the labor force, 62 percent. At the top of the class order, controlling the big business apparatus, is the capitalist class, about 2 percent of the labor force. A small fraction of the capitalist class operates on a national scale, and an even smaller network of several tens of thousands of interlocking directors among the largest of businesses is the core of the national ruling class. Between the capitalist class and the working class is the middle class, about 36 percent of the labor force.

While each of these classes is distinct from the others, all members of a particular class do not, of course, have the same degree of power, the same income, status, or lifestyle as others in the class. Each class is diverse -- in skill, authority, occupation, race, gender, ethnicity, and every other characteristic human beings possess. It even happens that individuals in one class can have attributes most often identified with another class, as when some skilled workers make more money than some professionals, or some managers work longer hours and have more stress than some production workers. Because some working class people go in and out of business, with small stores or contracting outfits that mostly serve their working class neighbors, a degree of overlap exists between working class and middle class experience. In many neighborhoods, there is more than a little personal identification across this porous class boundary.

We are all people. The capitalist, the worker, the doctor, all flesh and blood, all with hopes for ourselves and our children, most of us trying to do the best we can. But this underlying sameness, which is terribly important to remember and respect, in no way means that we are all equally powerful or that no systematic differences exist among us. Our different class standings cause us to act differently, live differently, have different experiences and life chances, despite our underlying resemblance in a common humanity. Within classes, people are different. An unskilled factory sweeper is in the same class as a radiology technician, a postal letter carrier, a bank teller, a machinist. The professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs of the middle class vary widely not only in the content of their work but in their social status, income, power. Among capitalists, too, are the big and the small, national and local power brokers, the well-connected and the relatively isolated. But despite the variations among people within each class, it still makes sense to view the world as made up of distinct classes, because, in the end, workers do not have the power of the middle class, let alone the capitalists, either big or small.

In the last decade of the twentieth century nonstandard work arrangements spread. Instead of holding a regular job, more and more people were working as temps, as independent contractors, as franchise operators. These new work relations were often forced on people after they had lost a regular job to downsizing or a company move or failure. These new arrangements usually brought with them a reduction in living standards, increased insecurity, an end to employer-provided pensions and insurance. Depending on how narrowly or broadly we define "temporary" or "contingent" jobs, in 1997 anywhere from 1.9 to 4.4 percent of the labor force was in nonstandard employment. Fewer than half were employed part-time.

The largest category of people with nonstandard work relations in 1997 was independent contractors, consultants, and freelance workers. Many of these were professionals and people involved in managerial or sales work and thus part of the middle class. But some "independent contractors" and "franchise operators" are not the middle class people their titles suggest. In 1998, forty thousand limousine drivers (car service, not taxi) were working in New York City. Some were in traditional employee status, but many were independent contractors, forced to lease their cars from car service companies. In these lease arrangements, which have the appearance of a business contract between two independent parties, the driver takes on the status of a franchise holder, but in reality is completely controlled by the car service company.

What class does the “independent” limo driver belong to? The question is not rhetorical; the answer controls whether the drivers can organize a union and force the company to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. In 1997, when drivers at one company wanted to organize, the company claimed they were independent contractors, not employees, and so not protected by labor law that gives workers the right to organize unions and requires their employer to negotiate in good faith. But the National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency that decides these disputes, dismissed the company's claim and ordered a union representation election. The drivers overwhelmingly voted the union in.¹⁴

The ambiguity of such borderline cases, and the wide variety of experience within classes, is testimony to the fact that classes are not simply boxes or static categories into which we pigeonhole people. Classes are formed in the dynamics of power and wealth creation and are by their nature a bit messy. Classes are more complicated, more interesting, and more real than the arbitrary income levels used to define class in the conventional wisdom.

Table 1. The Working Class Majority (millions of persons, 1996)

<u>Occupational Category</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Working class (no.)</u>	<u>Working class (%)</u>
Executive, administrative, and managerial	17.7	0	0
Professional specialty	18.8	1.5	8
Technicians and related support	3.9	2.9	74
Sales	15.4	6.8	44
Administrative support	18.3	17.6	96
Services	17.2	15.8	92
Precision production, craft, and repair	13.6	12.6	93
Operators, fabricators, and laborers	18.2	18.2	100
Farming, forestry, and fishing	3.6	2.0	55
Unemployed	7.2	5.4	75
Total	133.9	82.8	62

NOTES

¹ *Economic Report of the President 1999*, Table B-46, 380.

² Steven Greenhouse, “Passenger Service Workers Unionize at United Airlines,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1998, A7.

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, Tables 855 and 868.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Table 855.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Table 868.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ There is a large literature on the ruling class in the United States. My discussion owes much to the work of G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America Now?* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Shuster, 1983), and Beth Mintz and Michael Schwartz, *The Power Structure of American Business* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁸ *Statistical Abstract 1997*, Table 655.

⁹ *Statistical Abstract 1998*, Table 687.

¹⁰ Throughout the twentieth century the labor force has changed composition. An excellent description and analysis of this process is in Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 1974.

¹¹ *Economic Report of the President, 1999*, Table B-46.

¹² *Statistical Abstract 1997*, Table 645.

¹³ Robert Johnson, "Climbing to the Top of Black Businesses," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 1999, B1.

¹⁴ Kevin P. Lynch, "A Brief Overview of Organizing Employees Wrongly Identified as Independent Contractors," International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, District 15, no date.

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