

The language of social class

Britain		United States
upper class		middle class
middle class	upper middle class	working class
	lower middle class	
	lower class	highly-educated / undereducated white collar, professional / blue collar Eastern / Southern and Western cosmopolitan / rural, provincial

Class and work

Industry and Idleness (1747), a series of twelve engravings by William Hogarth

king's evidence

alderman (échevin)

From *The House of Mirth*, by Edith Wharton (1905)

“My goodness—you can’t go on living here!” he exclaimed.

“Lily smiled at his tone. “I am not sure that I can; but I have gone over my expenses very carefully, and I rather think I shall be able to manage it.”

“Be able to manage it? That’s not what I mean—it’s no place for you!”

“It’s what I mean; for I have been out of work for the last week.”

“Out of work—out of work! What a way for you to talk! The idea of your having to work—it’s preposterous.”

Class and morals, class and race

ASBO: anti-social behaviour order

Social class in Britain: the class-ridden society

Sibyl, or The Two Nations (Benjamin Disraeli, 1845)

The House of Lords and monarchy were abolished in 1649 and restored in 1660: commoners / peers

Bourgeoisie: industrialists, merchants and bankers.

Class, language and geography

local accents / class accents; public schools

George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 1913; *My Fair Lady* (1956)

The second half of the twentieth century

the Beveridge report (1942); the National Health Service (NHS); the benefits system; the “Keynesian /’keinz-/ consensus”

education: the tripartite system → the comprehensive system

monetarism; neoclassical economics; the Chicago school of economics; Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek

“There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.” Margaret Thatcher, conservative United Kingdom Prime Minister, 1987

America: from social rubbish heap to classless Eden?

‘British colonists promoted a dual agenda: one involved reducing poverty back in England, and the other called for transporting the idle and unproductive to the New World.

‘After settlement, colonial outposts exploited their unfree laborers (indentured servants, slaves, and children) and saw such expendable classes as human waste.

‘The poor, the waste, did not disappear, and by the early eighteenth century they were seen as a permanent breed. [...]

‘Long before they were today’s “trailer trash” and “rednecks,” they were called “lubbers” and rubbish” and “clay-eaters” and “crackers”. [...]

‘Before it became that fabled “City upon a Hill,” America was in the eyes of sixteenth-century adventurers a foul, weedy wilderness—a “sinke hole” suited to ill-bred commoners [...] a place into which they could export their own marginalized people.’ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash*, 2016

Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (2012)

America and aristocracy

‘[...] I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. [...] There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society.’ Thomas Jefferson, co-author of the American Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, in a letter to John Adams, 28 October 1813

America’s elite universities: a warped meritocracy?

The highest-ranking American universities use descent (“legacy status”) as a criterion to select their students.

According to a study by Jessica M. Wang and Brian P. Yu (2017)

29% of first-year students at Harvard are children of alumni.

According to a study by Michael Hurwitz (2011) an applicant's chance of being admitted in a top-ranking university is higher by 45 percentage points if their parents are alumni.

Race and class in the United States

Slavery abolished by the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution (1865), racial segregation by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

maternal mortality rate of black women: three to four times higher than that of white women.

People with similar occupations and incomes but different ethnicities are often described as different social classes.

'Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people [...]; then next to them – not above, just away from – were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged.'

Flannery O'Connor, 'Revelation', 1965

Race, class and geography in the United States

Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi (later president of the Confederacy) in the antebellum United States

	North	South
social classes	rich / poor	white / black

'No white man, in a slaveholding community, is the menial servant of anyone.'

agrarian economy, slaveholding, landgrabbing elite / landless 'poor white trash'

'Then you made your way through the first suburb, *proletarian and proudly white* Oak Woods, a dinky, arrogant neighborhood with a preponderance of American flags waving in the wind.'

Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (emphasis added)

'[Segregation was enforced to] completely separate poor whites and blacks [...] so that [...] people will not have a chance to get together, to talk and to see their commonalities [...] to prevent any kind of alliances and cut fellow feeling.' (Mara Keire, history lecturer, on the BBC Radio 4 show *In Our Time* of June 15, 2017)

'Throughout Southern history race is used to trump class [...] you emphasise racial divisions in order to prevent people with a common unity, a common set of interests, coming together on class lines.' (Lawrence Goldman, history professor, *ibid.*)

Class and urban space

"Try to own a suburban home," said an advertisement by the British Freehold Land Company in the 1920s, "it will make you a better citizen and help your family. The suburbs have fresh air, sunlight, roomy houses, green lawns and social advantages." It perfectly summarises the ideal behind suburbia, which is where most people in Britain live today. The huge suburban expansion of British cities between the wars accommodated population growth and enabled people to buy homes at low prices. London doubled in area over those two decades and increased its population by 1.2 million people. Speculators built semi-detached houses for sale at between £400 and £500 which were close, as another advertisement put it, to "tiny hills and hollows ... pools of water, brambly wildernesses, where in spring nightingales sing and the air is sweet with the smell of violets, primroses and hawthorn".

Rowan Moore, *The Observer*, Sunday 10 July, 2016

Levitt & Sons built seven suburbs, comprising 140,000 housing units.

zoning laws and other regulations kept blue-collar workers away.

'white flight' / trailer parks.

gentrification

The twofold Protestant legacy of class perception in America

The Protestant work ethic dovetails with the themes of the American dream, the self-made man, the land of opportunity: the myth of a country without determinism, where the free individual enjoys limitless possibilities to (re)invent himself, to cross class boundaries.

'She had seen from the first that the child belonged with the old woman. *She could tell* by the way they sat – kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up.'

Flannery O'Connor, 'Revelation', 1965 (emphasis added)

Cinderellas for the nineteenth century

From rags to riches: celebrating meritocratic societies or rewriting medieval morality plays and fairy tales?

Oliver Twist or The Parish-Boy's Progress (by Charles Dickens, published 1837-1839)

Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks (by Horatio Alger Jr, published 1867-1868)

manifest destiny

Tragic and tragicomic visions of social class at the turn of the twentieth century

Jane Austen; comedy of manners...

While Dickens and Alger wrote about lower-class characters and their journey up the social ladder as moral fairy tales...

Edith Wharton

In *The House of Mirth*, a young woman loses her position in the New York upper class because of her financial difficulty. The plot of this story of social downfall revives the medieval theme of the wheel of fortune.

In *The Custom of the Country*, a young middle-class midwestern woman relentlessly pursues her endless quest for social climbing, never satisfied with the situation she has achieved, and mindlessly destroying the lives of everyone around her

in the process.

Nineteenth-century evolutionist theories on social class: 'social Darwinism'

Herbert Spencer: *Progress: Its Law and Cause* (1857), *The Social Organism* (1860)

Francis Galton, eugenics

Cross-class erotics

"Men of Carpenter's class and background were necessarily affected by the guilt which pervaded sexual desire and the body. Unable to synchronise lust with ideals, both homosexual and heterosexual men turned to the lower classes for forbidden sex, partly because the codes of correct behaviour did not hold with outsiders. Casual cross-class encounters were part of the underground culture of the nineteenth century. Many of these would be overtly commercial transactions and they always carried complex nuances of power." Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (2009)

D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928); E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (1913-1960)

Reverting the stigma: reclaiming class identity, glamorising lower-class stigma

Dolly Parton: 'It takes a lot of money to look this cheap'

'We could see the pictures of the models in the newspapers that lined the walls of our house and the occasional glimpse we could get at a magazine. We wanted to look like them. They didn't look at all like they had to work in the fields. They didn't look like they had to take a spit bath in a dishpan. They didn't look as if men and boys could just put their hands on them any time they felt like it, and with any degree of roughness they chose. The way they looked, if a man wanted to touch them, he'd better be damn nice to them.'

'Trash', by Brett Anderson, from the Suede album *Coming Up* (1996)

Maybe maybe it's the clothes we wear
The tasteless bracelets and the dye in our hair
Maybe it's our kookiness
Or maybe maybe it's our nowhere towns
Our nothing places and our cellophane sounds
Maybe it's our looseness
But we're trash you and me
We're the litter on the breeze
We're the lovers on the streets
Just trash me and you
It's in everything we do
It's in everything we do
Maybe maybe it's the things we say,
The words we've heard and the music we play,
Maybe it's our cheapness,
Or maybe, maybe it's the times we've had,
The lazy days and the crazes and the fads,
Maybe it's our sweetness,
But we're trash, you and me,
We're the litter on the breeze,
We're the lovers on the street,
Just trash, me and you,
It's in everything we do,
It's in everything we do

Dirty White Trash, by Tim Noble and Sue Webster (1998)