

Class Society and Democratic Renewal

Martha Carter

Suppression of the lower classes in our culture, throughout history and today, will inevitably lead to some sort of independence-seeking rebellion or revolution. The development of the class structure, and the forms of oppression which accompany it, nullify the character of an individual by a subsumption of the person into a class grouping. A person loses his or her identity as an individual and becomes a mere member of a group. The groups gain an aspect of rank, which alienates the lower ranked classes even more. As a group, the people accumulate the negative side effects of oppression and will eventually react as a group. This reaction will be animated by the feeling of wanting to regain what they believe is *truly theirs*. The struggle for revolution will help to regain the individual aspects and fairness the people desire, as well as power. Yet, the upper classes want to suppress the aspirations of the lower classes as much as possible in order to keep an ideal life for themselves, for what they think is *truly theirs*.

The simplest concept of class lies within its definition. It means “a number of people or things grouped together because of certain likenesses; kind; sort...social or economic rank /the working *class*” (Neufeldt 111). If we were to assume class dealt with one’s economic rank, then factors, or likenesses, such as income, wealth, job or career, and even education are thought of—anything relating to one’s position in an occupational setting that might influence the non-workplace style of living. The American class culture is largely based on an economic ranking system. However, the addition of the “social” aspect dramatically changes the view on the economic based class. Although the definition reads “social or economic rank” (Neufeldt 111), it would be more accurate to say “social and/or economic rank”, because in many societies both

influence the application of rank. Social aspects in classifying people can include religion, family, the neighborhood one lives in, the way one dresses, or the people one socializes with—many of the social aspects relate with how one spends or uses the economic advantages one has. This social aspect gives rise to stereotypes, further breaking down and classifying of society.

The combination of the economic and social aspects for ranking class can be a bit confusing, especially when using stereotypic categories. Although Americans are primarily classed by their economic situations, the social stereotypes further categorize the people. The stereotypes surrounding the various classes can cause individual characteristics of a person to be lost, resulting in a population of people trying to conform to certain group levels. For instance, if a worker in New York City earns the same wages as a worker in Franklin County, Virginia, their salary would place them in the same class. Yet, the dramatic difference in the cost of living would make a big difference in living situations, which would make the worker from New York City appear in a lower rank. The way one dresses can also be very influential. One usually supposes that upper class people will be dressed in nice, name brand clothing. Alternatively, there are some lower class people that wear five gold chains, name brand clothes from their shoes to their hat, drive a nice car with a good stereo, and who live in government housing. These people are placed in cheap government housing programs because they lack sound economic grounding, yet they seem to live a very comfortable life, given their situation.

Throughout history, the development of the class structure coincided with the development of private property, separation of town and country, the division of labor, more outward views and interactions with the world, and many other developments in social structure. Before the class structure starts to take a definite form, people were living in tribal settings, where ownership of property was tribal. There was no understanding of private property. The

social structure was based more on a family structure (concerning the division of labor), where the men of the village may do the hunting and fishing, while the women tended the animals and cooked. These tribal duties were based mostly on what certain members of the family would do within the family, but were extended to the tribe. A loosely applied class structure would be the “patriarchal family chieftains, below them the members of the tribe, finally slaves” (Marx, “Idealism...” 5). The class structure starts to emerge as tribes unite to form small towns. The property is considered mostly communal, yet there were some areas designated as private property, although it is different from modern private property. As the private property concept expanded, so did the division of labor and the antagonism between town and country ideals. It is within this stage that a distinction “between citizens and slaves...completely developed” (Marx, “Idealism...” 6).

As the development of production and division of labor evolved, classes that were more distinct emerged. In the Middle Ages, within the sparsely populated country areas, feudal lifestyles were the most common. The feudal system consisted of “feudal or estate property” (Marx, “Idealism...” 6). The estates resembled small communities where “enslaved small peasantry” replaced the slavery of communal ownership (Marx, “Idealism...” 6). Essentially, the serfs were bound like slaves to the noble landowners, for there were few other options when land ownership was not available to them. There was no way for a poor serf to rise above his or her station—the land and the wealth were passed down through the noble families. After growing tired of the feudal lifestyle, serfs began to break away from estates and congregate in towns where labor did not revolve around land. This separation between town and country changed the class structure dramatically. Before this separation, the grouping of classes dealt mainly with property ownership—landowning class and non-landowning class. Although there

may have been more distinctions within each category, this aspect made the gap too wide for serfs to cross. The upper, wealthy classes were those who owned property, while the lower, working classes were those who owned no property—meaning they had to live a subservient life to the property owners. After the separation of town and country, the class ranking system became broader in the non-landowning class.

The development of towns revolutionized the number of possibilities for non-landowning individuals. The class of burghers developed, or people who lived in towns and could make a living without owning or working on land. As the burghers started to form a class structure of their own, the landowners had more competition for the upper class positions. Now, the suppressed serfs were rising and make a living without dedicating themselves to a landowner. The rise of the guild system kept assurance of job and trade to the workers. The guild members soon lost out when advancements in production, through division of labor and mass production, caused the demand for specialized training and skills to be unneeded. The lower classes started developing into various levels, for the struggle of competition between groups of people created a “common battle” (Marx, “Proletarians...” 1). The bourgeoisie formed a new class—the middle class, and the proletariats became the working class (Marx, “Proletarians...” 1). With the class structure having three main levels, this shortened the gap between the upper and lower classes. Before, serfs could not imagine moving up into the next class. Now, this was a much better possibility—one that could be worked for. This three-tier class structure resembles our class structure today.

As industry developed over the years, the towns became cities that attracted working class people. The owners of these industries became wealthy while they fed the demands of the working class. However, the working class inadvertently pushed themselves into an economic

situation that would be hard to escape from. Their labor offered little reward other than the salary, while their jobs were generic and easily replaceable. Their labor required little skill and education and the supply was great, which meant little job security and much competition. They had found the economic independence they were seeking, but were still very dependent on the owners of the means of capital.

Today, the class system envelops our entire existence. Not only are we placed into a class level based on our economic status, we are often presumed to possess certain qualities when we belong in a given class. Often, people try to appear to others as possessing these qualities in order to look like they are in a higher class. This illustrates the competitiveness of the human social structure. The competition is between the classes themselves and the individuals within the classes. The goal is to appear as though you are in a higher class by spending money in order to impress others and gain attention. For instance, the appearance of one's vehicle, house, clothing, hairstyle, or artificial fingernails illustrate the competitiveness of wealth. All of these characteristics may loosely indicate class level, yet it may be noted that none are required for basic survival. Competition in our class system has evolved beyond surviving to luxury¹. Most people are trapped in this competitive struggle, although some do not realize that it exists. The striving force behind the competitive struggle is what keeps the lower classes lowest, for it rises the standards of upper class characteristics, and keeps the lower classes spending their money on the constantly changing ideals. This force also keeps the higher classes high, for the lower classes are constantly striving to meet changing goals, which pads the pockets of the controlling higher classes.

There are many problems with the structure of the class system. For the lower class individuals, the lack of advantages and opportunity can make it difficult to better ones self, for a

person can not rise out of the social class he or she was born into. Often, lower class children do not have the same educational opportunities, exposure to new technology (even computers), medical treatment, and the nutritious meals that most middle and upper class children experience. Although some of the poorer children can achieve a more desired way of life, through advantages like college scholarships and government aid, some of the children are fated to the class. The reason they are stuck is that so many generations of their family has always been on the bottom and have lost hope or concern about achieving higher standards, and they do not enforce or impose any goal or motivation into the minds of their children. This lack of concern is not because they do not want the best for their children; it is because they have accepted their lives and situation and do not see the chance of making it better. They would rather accuse the system for the fate of their lives instead of trying to change it. As written by Karl Marx, "...the class in its turn achieves an independent existence over and against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, become subsumed under it" ("Proletarians..." 2).

The concept of class has grown beyond conception. Class has evolved, grown, and redefined itself over the centuries until it has actually made an existence outside and independent of us (humans). The concept of class began as an unnamed, unspoken, and underlying societal representation, and it has incorporated itself into almost every aspect of our lives. It now exists as a defining element in a person's character and development. The effects of class have become something that is beyond our control and can only be controlled if the unnatural competition of humans is destroyed. If everyone were to be equal, like the lifestyle that Socialism desires, then unnecessary competition would be abolished.

Now that there is a definite distinction between what is upper class and what is lower class, the upper classmen want to keep that distinction. They had to separate the classes in a manner in which the lower classes would not want to merge into the boundaries of the upper classes. A separation of the classes based on residency would occur. There would be the rich side of town and the poor side of town. The lower classes will have to obtain a certain amount, or feeling, of ownership over something so that they will not want more than what is being offered. When living in towns, the upper classes want to make sure the lower classes have a place to call home—a place that is separated from the housing of the middle and upper classes. This home may be small, not well ventilated, filthy, and crowded, but it is something that can be considered their own. Of course, it will never compare to the spacious houses on the other side of town, or the mansions on the hillside, but the lower classes will never experience the difference. These buildings can be rented out to the working class, that way you always have the upper hand. If one does not meet the rent requirements, then take the privilege of housing away. In this capitalist society, a person will labor for money in order to turn around and give it back to the capitalist in the form of rent.

There would be enough businesses and recreational areas in the poor neighborhoods so that they would not have to venture far from their homes. The upper classes wanted to make sure that the lower classes would not want to go to the same recreation areas as the upper classes. This could be achieved by making public parks, swimming pools, beaches, and clubs. The upper classes would only go to private recreation facilities. In addition, there can be entertainment fees to operas, plays, or concerts. If both classes have similar interests on viewing the same shows, then a great way to separate the audience is to make the better seats more expensive, to guarantee that upper class people will get most of them. That way, the lower classes can sit in the aisles,

back seats, and balconies—where the seats are more affordable. To guarantee that lower class people will not drink in upper class bars, make sure there are two to three bars in lower class neighborhoods for every one on the rich side of town. To separate the educational facilities, one could opt for a private school, or one could divide the cities into school districts, making sure to keep certain neighborhoods away from other certain neighborhoods. Of course, when it comes to higher education, if a lower class student has the initiative and intelligence to make it to college, then governmental aid will be given to the most promising students. These students are more worthy of sharing the facilities than other lower class residents, for they have more potential to rise out of the lower working classes.

Now that the lower classes are contained within their own neighborhood, the upper classes will want to keep them pushed down into that position. With the more informative media and better educational facilities for everyone, it will be harder to suppress them as well as in the past. First, the living conditions of the lower classes must be unbearable. The cost of living will have to be determined, which will be based on the minimum wage. Alterations will have to be made in order to guarantee that a certain percentage of the population will be below the poverty level. Rent, food, medication, and health care prices will be going up at a faster rate than minimum wage. Only the upper and middle classes will be able to keep up—the lower classes will have to reroute their expenses or suffer by living without these beneficial conditions. Families will not be able to afford as much food for everyone, so many families will go hungry while some will starve. The undernourished masses will be weaker and sicker, which will make their resistance to suppression easier to control. If the family can not afford to be healthy, then limited health care will be provided. However, the health care assistance given to the families would not be as efficient and full in coverage as a paid health care plan. It may help the burden

of no insurance, but it would be hard for most families to meet the bill. Even with the assistance, many will not benefit.

Next, the upper classes want to make the lower classes rely and depend on them. Of course, the working classes already realize that the security of their job is in the hands of the upper classes, but more dependence is necessary. Almost all of the elected officials will be of the middle or upper classes, so if the lower classes want to make alter any official matters, then they will have to appeal to the representative above them. This will be the only connection the lower classes will have with the government. The upper classes will own the local stores and businesses. Every once and a while, some donations could be made to charity, so that public attention can be brought to the hospitality of the wealthy.

The upper classes will also want to limit the access to useful information or decent education. If the lower classes are not exposed to the dangers of living an unhealthy lifestyle, then they will continue living that way. In 1917, Margaret Sanger was struggling to have the benefits of birth control become public knowledge. She met much opposition from the law, doctors, and upper classes. As she watched working class women die from “the strain of frequent childbearing” and abortions, and children die from starvation and neglect, she became adamant to save the lives of children and women (Sanger, “The Case...” 140). However, the doctors were not willing to break the law for the lower class women, but did part with the information when the patient was from the upper class. So many lives would have been saved and unwanted pregnancies prevented if exposure to this knowledge was made. The lower classes are getting better information today, but the public needs to be exposed more.

The lower classes are controlled through many ways, some the extent of which they are unaware. They are controlled through the laws and government, through political economy

(through capitalism, labor, and private property), through religion, and through the media. Sometimes it may seem that the lower classes are the only ones being suppressed and alienated, but all people are in some ways. Even if people realize that they are controlled and influenced through the society, they often do not know how or when unless it is pointed out after the fact.

The government and the laws control the people in many ways, and the lower classes usually get the worst discrimination and suppression. This is not to imply that all the laws and actions created by our government are negative, but some do not seem to hold the people as its main regard. First, our government claims to be democratic, but the voice of all the citizens is not held at a great value. The representatives (usually upper class) for the people do not hold the same values and concerns as many of the people they represent, which leaves the government with little opportunity to address the problems of the lower classes. Second, the government representation is unfair and suppressing. This has been a problem throughout history. Today is a little better, for the representation is not based on nobility or heredity. The election process makes it fairer, but running a campaign is expensive, which makes most lower class people unable to run. In addition, the taxes placed on the citizens do not seem fair. The lower classes are struggling to make ends meet because being paid minimum wage places a family below the poverty level. When tax time comes, they have to pay dearly while the upper class people find ways to get out of paying their taxes. These people have more than enough money and refuse to contribute taxes that will benefit all. However, the various governments have improved greatly in the last century—especially regarding civil rights. Before the Civil Rights Movement, many southern states enforced Jim Crow Laws—laws that were used to impose white superiority over black people without the component of slavery. These laws were practiced until the black population started to defend their rights. Since this movement, the United States government is

enforcing civil and moral rights at remarkable rates. This has helped alleviate the lower classes and minorities from the burdens placed on them from the ruling classes through the form of law.

Especially in a capitalist society, the lower working classes are controlled through the political economy. The capitalists control the working classes because they own the means of production. In fact, in America, less than five percent of the population owns over ninety percent of the wealth (Marx Seminar Class). This statistic alone illustrated how unfair the economic system is. Although the working classes do most of the labor required for production, they see little benefit. The capitalist not only has financial superiority; he also controls the workers by regulating the hours they work, who shall do which job, who shall receive a promotion or raise, and so forth. If the worker does not like the demands placed before him or her, then another job must be found. The capitalists also own much property. They require rent of some sort to be paid in order a person to use the land. Even if a tenant improves the land, the land owning capitalist can raise the rent as if he or she made the improvement.

Religion is another way of controlling and alienating the masses of people. Religion is desired, sought after, and practiced by a majority of population, yet most can not see what is behind the religion and the desire to believe in it. Marx says that, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world...It is the opium of the people" (Oxford 499). In this sense, religion seems like it is something that people hold on to in order to fulfill a certain need or desire. Religion fills the gap in a person's soul and life by giving them something to hold on to that is separate and distinct from the mundane physical existence. Religion is used to answer unanswerable questions of life, unite people, and give a meaning to life and death.

Leaders use religion to suppress the population, yet it also suppresses the people in an unseen form. Throughout the history of Christianity, the ruling classes have obtained more

power and control over the lower classes by making them feel obligated, trapped, and pressured to meet the demands they gave through religion. Christianity values a person who is good, does not commit any of a variety of sins, is moral, and attends church regularly. Anyone who does not meet the demands of the religion will suffer for eternity, while those who are good will live in the paradise of Heaven with the supreme God. The threat of damnation influences the population to conform to an ideal proposed by the *Bible* and the pushers of religion. A sense of fear to stay faithful to the religion develops.

Over time, humans have lost the sense and memories that these religions were created by them. Religion is like an ideology that is created and shared by a group of people. It starts as something that is enjoyed and used as a unifying non-labor activity. As the stories and beliefs are passed through the generations, the concept that it was created by the humans is lost as it becomes a custom and habit of the people. The stories are no longer fictional—but real. For instance, people who reveled in the mysteries of the earth's creation created God. God then turned into a leader of the human race who could be just or harsh depending on the given circumstances. Not only was God loved—He was feared. People adapted their lifestyles into ones that they believed would not anger God. To pass the tradition along, the Bible was started, recording the beliefs of God's followers. It was added to and adapted over time to meet the needs of the generation, to make conformity a part of the religion. The people viewed these writings as the words of God, and hastily conformed to the pressures within the text.

Religion not only controls the lower classes; it influences and shapes all the classes into holding similar moral and behavioral patterns. All the classes devote themselves to meeting the Christian terms. They proclaim to lead moral lives but rarely unite to stand up for those beliefs. As a country, The United States has done horrible things to other countries and people, as well as

to our own people, but the many Christians do not fight the image our country has. They do resemble a flock of sheep following the leader. They only listen to what is presented to them through the church and are blinded to the rest of the world. Christianity is a class within itself.

The media is a means of controlling and influencing the public (all classes) in order to achieve the ideals of the few who control it. The people who control these means are often in the upper class. These people choose which stories or commercials are to be put on the air or in the newspaper and they decide which details should be deleted from the story. In this manner, they are controlling the impressions of the whole population. The media is under the control of the wealthy and the capitalists. These people contribute the information and advertisements that are broadcasted across the country. Whoever has the best financial offer will get the best time slot, and will then have the largest audience. The public has found occasions where the media neglected to inform them of America's affairs in other countries (like Vietnam). When the truth is revealed, little changes are made in the system.

Eventually, the lower classes are going to get tired of being suppressed and alienated from their labor and their lives. Throughout history, people have battled for their freedom and independence in order to get what they believe is truly theirs. They have had to sacrifice the security in life they have, hoping to achieve a fairer life through revolution. It just makes sense that people will grow tired of being pushed down and controlled by others. Most people want to have a certain amount of freedom in their lives, but they fear that the changes will lead to chaos throughout the country. They need a certain amount of organization, but with a lot of personal freedom. It is a large step to take, but when people get desperate, they will take desperate steps.

In earlier times, the need for revolution came from angry mobs or radical thinkers, who were being influenced by figures dictating the need to act. In recent times, more people than

ever are being educated with at least a simple understanding of the world around them. The rise in education has led people to revolt in methods that are more non-violent. Non-violent tactics, such as voicing opinions through radio or written documents, marching, petitions, or lectures, have been a starting point for any group of people who wishes to see changes in their society, country, or world. With the aid of television, radio, and the publication process, the ideas of people are circulated throughout the entire country, if not the entire world. The opinions of people shape and alter the impressions of other people, leading to an understanding and conformity of ideas and concepts. However, when the non-violent tactics are not recognized or acted on, then the group becomes desperate for their cause and hateful to those against them. This is when the threat of war and violence takes over the movement. It is very unfortunate that our democratic, government system is not set up to listen to the demands of the population. If it were, then less hostility and more compassion and compromising would take.

Yet, there are ways to prevent war and hostile efforts from taking over our society. We have to focus on deconstructing the class system. If the class system were deconstructed, every person would have the same exposure and opportunity to learn. A redistribution of wealth and capital would open opportunities for everyone. Control of large businesses would make people profit from their work, instead of being alienated. Structures like the media, newspapers, televisions, and radios should be honest, comprehensive, and open to the public's influence and alterations. The government should be democratic in its decisions and should always work to improve the lives of its citizens. Without the class system, there would be less need for competition. The competition separates the population and stops them from uniting to achieve goals that are more beneficial.

Martha Carter is a Double Major in Philosophy and Religion at Ferrum College.

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