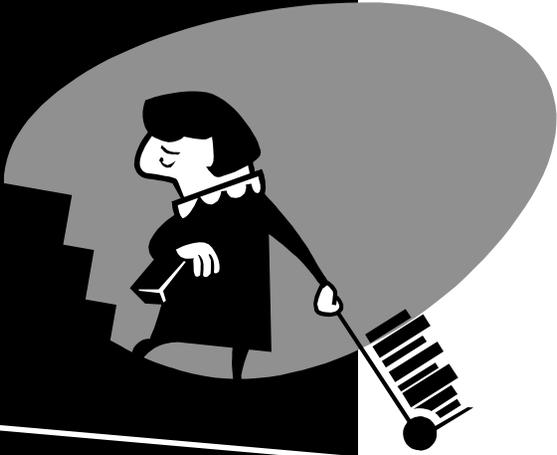


Working Class



Educated



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When I discovered as an adult I am not middle class I went into mild shock. The discovery came during a course I was taking with Dr. Katie Cannon. She introduced us to Paul Fussell's "Living Room Scale"¹, an exercise designed to help people locate themselves along class lines. The exercise values things in your living room by assigning them with positive or negative numbers. A hardwood floor, for example, gets you 4 points, while you lose 6 points for a vinyl floor. Each person begins the exercise with 100 points and goes down the list of possible living room contents by adding or subtracting points. Though there are undoubtedly flaws to this test, the important thing about it for me was what it taught me about my own class standing. First of all, as someone raised to value "new" things, I was shocked that a new oriental rug rated minus two points, while a threadbare rug rated plus 8! I learned of the existence of Tiffany lamps (3 points) and parquet floors (8 points). I was astonished to discover that I, who pick up clutter all day long, might have gotten an additional 6(!) points for "overflow books stacked on floor, chairs, etc." Just in doing the exercise I learned a few things – such as "I know less about what counts than I thought." As I recall, I ended up with about 102 points, which according to Fussell puts me just into the middle class. Part of what got me those points was the high ceilings and shapely wooden molding of the dormitory I was living in.

After taking the test for my living room of three years ago, I also took the test for the living room of my childhood and my parents' current living room. My parents immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands in 1953. The house we rented until I was 9 didn't have indoor plumbing. Today, my parents live in a brand new home built by my father and furnished with many new things. I wanted to measure the extent of their class mobility over time. I was not prepared for the results. Our living room of the 1950's scored just over seventy points, putting my family at "high prole" (Fussell's term for comfortable working class), while the living room of the 1980's scored only another ten points. Those ten extra points left my parents in the same class. So much for thirty-five years of "upward mobility"!

It wasn't until I did this exercise that I really understood that class is about a whole lot more than money. Today my parents have money they never dared dream of when they started work for the Canadian farmer who sponsored them. While their financial picture has changed,

however, their education, family history, assumptions and values have not.²

Katie Cannon further helped me and my classmates unpack the mystifying jumble of things, besides economic income, that go into determining class. How each of these factors plays out is influenced to greater or lesser degrees by one's gender, race, and sexual orientation. None of these by itself can determine class location. They all work together. Assuming anything about another person based on just a couple of these factors can be very misleading.

- **Ancestry:** Who your parents, grandparents, etc. are or were determines a great deal about who you are in the world and how you will be treated.
- **Style of life:** Do you travel, dine out, clean up your own messes, go bowling? Do you "entertain guests" or "hang out with friends"? What groups, clubs or leagues are you a member of? What are your hobbies? Your style of life is determined by the choices that are available to you and these are very much dependent on how you are seen, what access you have to resources, and what shapes your values – all class-influenced.
- **Education:** What degrees do you have and where do they come from? A degree from an ivy league college or university assumes something different than a diploma from a trade school – even if both require the same amount of time, energy, skill and intelligence.
- **Interpersonal Relations:** Who you spend time with and who you are acquainted with or connected to says a lot about who you are and what your choices or options in life are.
- **Manners:** Each class has its own rules and conventions for both public and private behavior. Which ones you know best are indicative to you and others of "where you belong." Passing as someone from a different class, requires, in part, that you know the rules of that other class.
- **Social Distance:** The higher your class location, the more choices you have about how much distance you can have from other people. Privacy assumes both a value and access since it can be very expensive. How much privacy a person or family wants and can get usually says something about their class location.
- **Values:** What you consider to be the relative worth of things, ways of behaving, being, and believing are greatly determined by your class location.

- **Ideology/Political Stance:** Whose side you are on, what issues you support and how you support them (financial contributions, volunteer work, demonstrations, talk, etc.) all say something about your class location.
- **Religious Affiliation:** In terms of class status in the US, it is helpful to be Christian. And the classiest Christians tend to be Episcopal or Unitarian Universalist.
- **Motivation:** Having the energy and drive to get things done is dependent on what you believe you can achieve. And this is usually dependent on what messages you are given both by those inside and outside your class.
- **Expectations:** What you expect out of life generally or a situation particularly is determined by what you are led to expect. What you dream for yourself (if you dream) and what you see as obstacles are for the most part taught to you by the people of your class.
- **Language:** Your command of the NBC English – in terms of accent, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, etc., is key to class in the US. If you cannot train your tongue or your pen, you can only ever pass as yourself.
- **Geographic Location:** It makes a difference in class terms whether you live in the city or in the country, whether you live in Oklahoma City or Philadelphia.

Though this was not on the Dr. Cannon's list, I would include another factor that goes into class standing: **control**. What or who you can control or wish to control is deeply connected to your class location. The higher your class standing, the more you are likely to assume or be given control over people, places, systems, information, property, etc. A key to uprooting classism (as well as racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression) is the redistribution of control. The upper classes currently have enormous control over much of the everyday lives of everyone else, for it is the upper classes who decide who gets what and how come. In many cases that control is held in place by the buffer class³ – teachers, police, security, social workers, etc. Access to control typically determines one's relationship to control. People in the upper classes tend to hold on to control in large and small things because this is what they are taught. At the same time, people in the "under classes" are systematically trained to give up control.

Articulating the conflict of values I, as a woman of the working class with educational privilege, carry inside me has

enabled me to understand the alienation I first experienced when I left home at 17 to attend college. Much of my experience in the four years I worked towards a B.A. was about internalizing middle class values and trying to purge myself of values that I had come to college with. I read, analyzed, and discussed novels, plays and movies that I didn't understand. I got cast in plays and acted the part of characters I am still mystified by. When I went home for visits, I presented my parents with such "sophisticated" gifts as Matisse prints and Deutsche Grammophone albums. I was revolted by my parents' provincialism and small (read simple)- mindedness. They were suspicious of the things I was learning and even today would find the words I am writing in this moment irrelevant to their lives.

One of the moments that stands out for me in hindsight as symbolic of my "choice" to be middle class came when I began my sophomore year and moved into a new dorm room. During the move, I took a pair of plaster plaques, given to me the summer I left for college by a friend who stayed behind in our rural town, and I cracked them over my knee. I decided I would not have something so "kitschy" on my wall. I shudder to think how many, many times I have chosen appearance over right-relation because of classism.

This story is not uncommon. However, the analysis that attempts to make sense of these experiences is, I believe, unfamiliar to most people, even those who have a similar experience. Reviewing my life's experience in the context of class has helped me understand that experience in new ways. It has also pushed me to intentionally use the lens of class through which to examine what I see on a daily basis. Not that this lens is necessarily focused. There is much that continues to confuse me and there is much that I miss altogether. Recognizing that I am a working class woman who has the privilege of education has helped me newly appreciate and reclaim a host of values which in the process of assimilating into the middle class I learned were unimportant, rude, crude, or (my favorite) "ungracious." Some of these values include plain-spokenness, lack of pretense, hard work balanced with rest and leisure, living in community, rootedness in place and time, getting along with people you don't necessarily like (because you don't have a choice) and finding humor even in the most trying situations.

When I began to reclaim my working class identity, I romanticized my past, my people, my origins. Conversely, I

was revolted by anything I perceived to be middle or upper class. I uncovered a strong anger and deep disdain for middle and upper class assumptions, lifestyles, values, options, and fears. Both of these tendencies still operate for me on a daily basis, though with less force now than a few years ago. It is no accident that it took me until I was 33 years old to name my heritage as working class. Class in the US and Canada is a mystifying thing. This "new world" was presumably founded on the notion that all people are equal and should have equal opportunity. Such a myth does not support straight thinking about issues of class. If we are collectively going to work toward a just society, it is mandatory that we understand how class operates in our society – how we use it and how it uses us.

When I began to understand about class, I found myself claiming my working-class roots. I still have a Master's degree and whatever advantages that gives me. What is different for me now, is that I lend less credibility or importance to what the middle and upper classes say and do. My point of reference intentionally and consciously now includes the values I learned in the working class community. Figuring out how to use the privileges my education has given me to the advantage of working class people continues to be a growing edge for me.

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1. Paul Fussell. *Class*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1983. Pp. 230 to 233.
 2. I do not intend to imply that having access to more money is not a very tangible and important reality. However, class and money, though connected, are not the same thing.
 3. A term I learned from Paul Kivel.