

# Class

VINCENT MOSCO

Queen's University, Canada

Class analysis is one of the more well-developed fields in social science and the concept has been used extensively in communication studies, especially in political economy and cultural studies research. Along with gender and race, class is a key concept for understanding divisions in society. In the case of class, it refers to control over resources, such as wealth and income, and the means to achieve them, such as education and occupation (Piketty, 2014). The term “class” appears to derive from the Latin *classis*, which described a division according to property among the people of Rome and made its appearance in 16th-century English in a reference to the various forms of vanity. One of the problems with the term is that it evolved into a very general concept to identify groups of plants and animals, as well as collections of people, without specific social implications. It was not until the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century that the modern division among types of social classes according to income, occupation, or education, such as lower, middle, upper, and working class, arose. In time, class superseded other notions of division (such as estate) with the increasing awareness that class divisions are socially constructed and not rooted in biological inheritance.

Research on class tends to emphasize one or another of its categorical, relational, or formational dimensions. Social class is *categorical* in the sense that it defines a category of people who occupy a position in society by virtue of their economic standing measured by the possession of a resource. Social scientists tend to identify class divisions according to differences in wealth or income, as well as education and occupation. Communication scholars have adapted this formulation to indicate divisions based on access to or control over media and information technology resources. For example, research on the digital divide examines class differences in access to the hardware, applications, and skills necessary to make effective use of online media (Wilkie, 2011).

The categorical approach is valuable for identifying the material gaps between categories of people, but by situating people into separate compartments, it has difficulty understanding how class categories relate to one another. To address this deficiency, it is useful to also see class as a *relationship* that identifies the connections among people based on their location with respect to the primary processes of social production and reproduction. In this sense, class is not only a position that adheres to an individual or group, but a relationship that connects, for example, the haves and the have-nots, the more and the less educated, or capital and the working class. According to the relational view, capital does not exist without the working class and vice versa. Social class is therefore embodied in the shifting relationship that connects and divides, for example,

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media owners and communication workers, or social media companies and those who make use of their sites.

While the relational view is useful as a means of connecting different classes, it does not sufficiently describe how different classes actively construct themselves through the social practices that provide a specific class identity and class consciousness. According to this *formational* view, social class exists to the extent that people are aware of and act on their class position. From this perspective, class is not just an external category, nor even just an external relationship. It also is a set of values that form a distinct identity.

Although distinguishable as such, these ways of thinking about social class also overlap considerably. For example, the research of social historians addresses social class as relational and as formational. A seminal work in the field examines how the British working class arose in relationship to a new class of capitalists who needed to employ what was once independent craft and agricultural labor in their factories (Thompson, 1966). In the process, new industrial workers came to identify with new values that eventually formed the core of what it meant to be working class.

These three different perspectives on social class have raised significant research questions. What marks a class category? Is it income, wealth, education, power, status, or some combination of these? What defines a class relationship? Is it control over the means of production, of reproduction, or of administration? Does individual awareness, social communication, or organized resistance best constitute class consciousness? Widespread differences about these dimensions and about the compatibility of various positions mark contemporary debates in research about social class. So too does the relationship between social class and other concepts that describe categories, relations, and formations in society such as gender and race.

Several types of studies mark contemporary research on social class. One follows a long tradition by examining the role of media, including both news and entertainment, in the construction of social class (Kendall, 2011). This research explores how the media represent class divisions in society and how different social class segments actually behave or should behave in society. Some of these representations reinforce social class stereotypes, but in different ways. On the one hand, there is the direct reinforcement that comes from portrayals, for example, of the “authoritarian” working class. On the other hand, there is the popular debasing of the upper class through depictions of their immoral or irrational behavior. Such portrayals suggest that those at the top are incapable of self-control, let alone the rational and systematic exploitation of an entire society.

Contemporary research on social class and the media also pays greater attention to media outside of North America and to the growing networks of class rule that link mass media to new communication and information technologies (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008). There is especially greater attention to developments in China and India where the media and information technology have grown spectacularly over the past decade. Research on the digital divide is also prominent in this research, including studies of divides within societies as well as globally. There are also attempts to move beyond the digital divide idea by examining how to develop communication and information services that can satisfy a fundamental human right to communicate.

There are also a growing number of studies that follow in the tradition of C. Wright Mills's classic work *The Power Elite*. These examine the dense network that links media entrepreneurs to the rest of the elite class, through their connections on corporate boards, business associations, civic organizations, and private clubs. Specifically, they describe how media moguls like Rupert Murdoch are able to build a media empire and influence governments. It also addresses the processes by which a set of powerful institutional "filters" help to shape the construction of news at elite media like the *New York Times* (Sussman, 2011). Some of this research recognizes that media increasingly spill over into the broader information arena by describing how power is applied to such diverse projects as the construction of a high-tech business district and the promotion of global brands in newly emerging societies.

Finally, there are studies that concentrate on the process by which class rule takes place in policy-making and regulation (Kozolanka, 2014). These also range widely to include struggles over the governance of digital music, the Internet, telecommunications systems, and information resources. Specifically, they document the mobilization of class power to construct a profitable regime of digital rights management over music, the expansion of corporate control over Internet governance, and the shift from public interest to market-based pricing of media, telecommunications, and information services.

These forms of class analysis demonstrate the value of the concept for understanding the production, distribution, and consumption of communication in society. Nevertheless, they treat social class mainly in *categorical* terms. The primary interest is in determining membership position in a category and in describing related behavioral patterns, including those responsible for the reproduction of class categories. They foreground social class as structure and treat the process of class formation largely as a problem of reproduction. This work has been essential to the critique of liberal pluralist views that deny or ignore the existence of a class structure and which maintain that the production, distribution, and consumption of media are the natural outcome of a democratic marketplace. According to liberal pluralism, the market may need some adjustment but, because the primary unit of analysis is the individual consumer (defined as a person or a business), its proposed adjustments amount to improved market functioning for the individual, rather than the amelioration of fundamental class divisions. Categorical class analysis provides a powerful critique of the liberal pluralist view, but its critical warrant can be strengthened by greater attention to *relational* and *formational* conceptions of social class. Whereas a categorical approach defines class by what is contained within a specific category—that is, wealth or income—a relational method looks for the connections or links between categories. According to this view, social class is not designated by what a class contains or lacks, but by its relationship to other classes. There is no upper class without a working class and vice versa. What principally counts about class is what defines the relationship between classes, such as ownership and control over the means of production, reproduction, communication, and so forth. The relationship can be characterized in numerous ideal types including *harmony*, where classes are integrated and mutually accept the class relationship, *separation*, where classes are largely excluded from one another, and *conflict* or *struggle*, where class relations are regularly contested.

In actual research practice, categorical and relational approaches overlap because one cannot speak of a category without some reference to the relationships that different categories form. Hence, even research that focuses almost complete attention on the communication elite will likely include material on the impact of this elite on its workforce and on consumers. Similarly, relational approaches necessarily refer to the categories that different relationships connect or divide. Even though the differences amount in practice to matters of degree or emphasis, these can be significant for the overall analysis of social class.

One of the important consequences of a categorical emphasis is a specific view of class that foregrounds the resources that give class power to the top categories and what, as a result, those categories at the bottom lack. It is important to acknowledge the significance of a lack of control over the means of production, reproduction, and distribution, and of a lack of the wealth, income, and the opportunities that go along with them. In communication, it is equally significant to document the consequences of a lack of access to the means of communication, mass media, and telecommunications. This is central to research on the digital divide. However, such a categorical view is limited to the conclusion, however important, that the lower classes are defined by the absence of power-generating resources. Sociology and communication studies have addressed this problem by viewing class structure as a continuum of categories (upper-upper, lower-upper, etc.) in which, as one moves down the continuum, classes exhibit diminishing economic, social, and cultural resources. However well this expands the class structure and recognizes some of the fuzziness at the borders of class categories, it does so at the cost of obscuring real categorical and relational class differences. A relational approach to class is based on specifying real relations among categories.

The concept of class formation is important because it views class as an active process of social formation that makes use of, and is constrained by, the resources available in the class structure. Social class is therefore less a category relatively full or empty of resources, including communication resources, and more appropriately, the set of changing social relationships resulting from the actions of social agents making use of, and limited by, the very structure of those relationships. In the process of social action, people constitute themselves and their class relations. This approach is less mechanical than one concentrating on categories because it permits one to see social class as both a central material force in social life and as the product of social action carried out by people on all sides of class relations.

An early starting point for the formational approach is the communication research of Mattelart (Mattelart & Siegelau, 1983), who calls this task the search for a "lost paradigm" containing the ways subaltern or lower classes constitute themselves, both in relation to dominant classes, as well as from a self-conscious sense of their own needs and interests. Acknowledging the difficulties of moving beyond a categorical view, he addresses the use of the mass media and popular cultural practices outside the West and the tradition of rank-and-file communication among workers in the West. He does so to demonstrate how these people built their own means of communication, developed their own languages, and their own common sense. In the process, they established their own popular hegemony, which, though constituted along with, alongside, and in conflict with a hegemony of the ruling classes, nevertheless provided independent grounds

for social action, including class struggle. Scholars have responded more substantially to this call for a formational approach to social class by examining working people as actual producers of communication and culture. It is useful to extend this discussion by examining a social class perspective that aims to go beyond the categorical by addressing labor in the communication industries.

The exercise of class power in the workplace has a long history in the social sciences with much of it centering on the separation of conception from execution at the point of production, and it is useful to give this more extensive treatment in light of growing research on the exercise of class power in the communications workplace through the elimination of labor and through the exercise of surveillance-based control over the remaining workforce (Mosco & McKercher, 2008). Furthermore, efforts are increasing to build on this research by offering relational and formational perspectives on communication labor and social class.

Because communication and information technologies have become so influential, jobs based on these technologies are receiving a great deal of attention with particular emphasis on the class composition of occupations in the communication and information industries—what is increasingly identified as knowledge labor. How one addresses this issue has important theoretical significance. Some have defined knowledge labor narrowly, limiting it to work that directly manipulates symbols to create an original knowledge product, or to add obvious value to an existing one (Florida, 2002). According to this view, knowledge workers are people like writers and artists, Web-page designers and software engineers, university professors and film directors. They comprise a so-called creative class that can translate intellectual power into political and economic power.

A broader definition of knowledge work encompasses the labor of those who handle, distribute, and convey information and knowledge. This includes schoolteachers at both the elementary and secondary levels, most journalists, librarians, media technicians like telecommunication and cable television workers, as well as those who work in the postal services. These are considered knowledge workers because an increasing amount of their work involves making use of information or information technology to efficiently and effectively deliver a product whose value is intended to expand a recipient's knowledge. In essence, they represent a middle class within the knowledge sector.

Finally, there is research asserting that anyone in the chain of producing and distributing knowledge products and services is a knowledge worker. In this view, the low-wage women workers in Silicon Valley and abroad who manufacture and assemble cables and computer components are knowledge workers because they are an integral part of the value chain that produces the essential hardware of knowledge work. Similarly, call center workers, who sell products and services over telecommunications networks, would also fall within this broad definition of knowledge work because they are central to selling information and because they make use of the products of communication technology to carry out their work. Furthermore, the management and control of their work would be far more difficult were it not for the advanced surveillance technologies made possible by developments in communication and information technology. These workers comprise the lower class of knowledge labor.

In essence, a categorical class analysis of media and knowledge labor yields a three-level hierarchy of creative, distributional, and production labor. But that is not sufficient because it is important to look beyond external criteria and examine the subjective experiences of the workers themselves, including the ways they choose to organize or structure their trade unions. This takes us to a relational and a formational view of social class. Trade unions have brought together a diverse range of workers under the same organizational umbrella—journalists and telephone operators, translators and customer service providers, healthcare workers and printers, as well as the people who write and broadcast the news and those who work the cameras and sound boards to bring it to viewers and listeners. These have had some success in mobilizing all three social class levels of knowledge workers in effective labor actions.

All of this is directly relevant to addressing the importance of social class because debates about the scope of how to think about knowledge work are also debates about social hierarchies. Since much of the research on knowledge work tends to see inclusion in that category as a positive development for the workers who make the move, the type of definition one accepts is also an implicit decision about who and how many are privileged. Limiting the definition to the creative class gives greater weight to the status of knowledge worker than would be the case if one accepted a broader definition that covers different types of workers, including many, such as call center employees, about whom it is far more difficult to justify the privileged label. A creative class opens the door to one type of political change, such as a shift in power to knowledge creators. A more heterogeneous vision of the knowledge work category points to another type of politics, one predicated on the potential for knowledge workers to unite across occupational and national boundaries, thereby translating solidarity based on a categorical view of their social class position into a formational view.

Another significant division in the concept of knowledge work holds important but different implications for understanding social class. Think of the continuum just described as operating along a vertical hierarchy with directly creative workers at the top and those who build computer hardware at the bottom. Knowledge workers can also be divided along a horizontal axis, falling into a pure content production category at one end of the continuum and a pure technical category at the other, with most knowledge and information workers located somewhere in the middle. Content and technical groups both include creative workers, but many other types of workers as well. The content category encompasses artists, entertainers, teachers, journalists, musicians, and others who might also be called a class of cultural workers. The technical category covers software designers, biomedical engineers, audiovisual technicians, and those whose creative contribution is the construction of code, the design and manufacture of technologies, and the production of signals. The work of this category makes possible the labor of cultural and other producers of what is typically viewed as content. Examined this way, the difficulties of calling all these people knowledge workers become readily apparent. What do engineers and writers have in common? Journalists and telecommunications specialists? Musicians and cancer scientists? Regardless of whether the concept of knowledge worker is defined broadly or narrowly along the vertical axis, we are still left with the divide between those who focus on creating culture and those who concentrate on technology. This

may make sense in a categorical or relational definition of social class but does it make a difference formationally, that is, in the class with which these workers identify?

This horizontal divide holds practical significance because cultural and technical workers are increasingly part of the same workplace and participate in the same labor process. This raises the obvious question of whether they can or will work together in a harmonious way, that is, act as class in the full formational sense of the concept. More importantly, technical and cultural knowledge workers are often included in the same labor organizations. Unions have brought together very different types of knowledge workers, not just those who are higher or lower in a vertical status hierarchy but also those who are on one side or the other of the divide between cultural and technical workers. What does this mean for the prospects of building class solidarity? Can this succeed within a single union, within a single country, across one border, or across one or more oceans? Considering the vertical and horizontal divisions that mark the meaning of knowledge work, it is easy to appreciate the challenge facing those who would unite them. Research on social class and communication demonstrates some of the successes and failures (Mosco & McKercher, 2008). But much more needs to be done because the stakes are high. Simply put, answering the question: “Will knowledge workers form a united class or remain divided in narrow occupational categories?” will go a long way to shaping the global political economy.

SEE ALSO: Critical Theory; Democracy; Economics; Information Society; Marxism; Media Sociology; Political Economy

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**Vincent Mosco** is professor emeritus of sociology at Queen's University where he was Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society and head of the Department of Sociology. His research interests include the political economy of communication, the social impacts of information technology, and public policy. His most recent book, *To the Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World*, was named a 2014 Outstanding Academic Title by *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries*.