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CHAPTER

# Contemporary Class Analysis

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## Abstract

A popular thesis in social stratification maintains that the middle class is declining. This chapter argues that this thesis is flawed both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, it mixes up the middle class and the working class, and empirically, it misrepresents the trends that shape the class structure. The chapter discusses the concept of social class and proposes a model that grasps the class structure of contemporary Western societies. Based on the conceptual distinction between the middle class and the working class, labor force surveys clearly show that the early twenty-first century saw, not the demise, but the expansion of the (salaried) middle class in the Western world. Never in history have so many people worked in managerial, professional, and technical jobs as do so today. By contrast, over the last four decades, the working class has experienced a massive employment decline —with far-reaching consequences. The political clout of the working class has declined, as is illustrated by decreasing trade union density and strike activity and in rising income inequality. Moreover, working-class decline has led to a fundamental realignment of class voting and contributed to growing family instability. Instead of eroding the middle class, the last decades have thus put an end to the working-class century.

**Keywords:** social class, middle class, working class, polarization, trade union, unemployment, income distribution

**Subject:** Economic Sociology, Sociology

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# 1. Introduction

In the 2010s, the class concept returned to the political limelight after two decades when social classes were fading into oblivion alongside the imploded communist regimes. Over the same period, survey-based sociology had continued, largely undisturbed, to analyze class inequalities—as exemplified by influential books on class differences in educational attainment (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016), social mobility (Breen and Müller 2020), or party choice (Evans and Tilley 2017). However, instead of thriving in the context of renewed public interest, sociological research on class inequalities appeared to be disconnected from the public debate on the subject. This led to a paradoxical situation in which issues of social class gained in political prominence, but were largely discussed in isolation from sociological evidence (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018, 4).

In Europe and the United States, growing public interest in social class has been closely linked with the argument of middle-class decline that prompted the Obama administration to set up the Middle Class Task Force, in 2009, and the German government to mandate, in 2013, a study "to examine the thesis of middle class erosion." The depiction of a growing moneyed elite at the top, as with Thomas Piketty's (2013) 1 percent, and a hollowing out of the labor market, as described in David Autor's (2010) job polarization, had struck a nerve with the wider public. With a shrinking middle class, it was not just one social class but a type of society that seemed under threat.

Although this doom scenario caught the media headlines,[1] the chapter argues that the debate on middle-class decline is flawed both conceptually and empirically. By using inadequate concepts of class, it mixes up the middle class and the working class and, consequently, misrepresents the empirical trends that shaped the class structure of affluent societies over the last decades. In Europe and North America, the early twenty-first century did not see the demise, but the *expansion* of the middle class. Notably, the ranks of the salaried middle class swelled as employment grew among managers, professionals, and technicians. In contrast, there was a massive decline in the working class. Under pressure from skill-biased technological change and offshoring, the ranks of the working class have thinned massively as the numbers of assemblers and machine operators, farmworkers and sales assistants plummeted across the Western world (Oesch and Piccitto 2019). Consequently, the working class's status as the uncontested majority class, which it held over long periods of the twentieth century, has come under pressure (Castel 1999)—and this decline had major, and often underappreciated, consequences for the political, economic, and social life in the Western world (Todd 2014).

The chapter first outlines why the public debate on middle-class erosion appears to be muddled by inadequate concepts based on income. Clarifying the definitions of social class then makes it possible to outline the pattern of change in the class structure over the last three decades. The chapter then shows that the salaried middle class has expanded, whereas the working class has shrunk across Europe. Finally, it discusses the implications these shifts in the class structure have for the politics, economics, and family structure of contemporary societies.

# 2. Getting the Class Concept Right

## 2.1. The Problem with Income-Based Definitions of Class

The public debate on class inequalities is marked by unclear definitions and measurements of class. In the political discourse of Europe and Northern America, the term *the middle class* has come to include almost everyone except the very wealthy and the poor (Cherlin 2014). The conceptual blurring of the middle class was fostered by the recent entry into the field of class analysis by economists who began to churn out studies on middle-class decline, measuring the middle class as an income group.

A first income-based definition of the middle class includes all households that earn more than the poverty line (60 percent to 75 percent of the median income) and less than twice the median income (Atkinson and Brandolini 2013; Grabka and Frick 2008; OECD 2019; Pressman 2007; Ravallion 2010). At the lower end, this means that whoever earns the minimum wage belongs to the middle class. In such countries as Chile, France, New Zealand, or Slovenia, the minimum wage equals or exceeds 60 percent of the median wage (OECD 2015, 2). Yet the minimum wage is typically paid to workers toiling in the most menial jobs, as textile workers, cleaners, domestic aids, or farmhands. According to these income-based definitions, either you are poor (and probably out of work) or you earn at least the minimum wage and are thus middle class.

A second definition considers the middle 60 percent—the income percentiles 20 to 80—as the middle class (Dallinger 2013). At the lower end, this means that all households except those living on social benefits belong to the middle class. In Europe, the proportion of the working-age population receiving benefits from unemployment, disability, sickness, or social assistance comes close to 20 percent (OECD 2003, 175). As long as a person holds down a job—any job—he or she is considered middle class. These two definitions are not only of doubtful value for empirical analysis—they are also ahistorical and unsociological, because they beg the crucial question about the whereabouts of the working class.

Two additional reasons explain why occupation-based definitions of class seem preferable to an income-based definition as proxies of individuals' life chances. First, household incomes and individual earnings are volatile over the life course, notably at the beginning and the end of people's working lives, and definitions of class in terms of income lead to changing class compositions (Mühlau 2014, 487). Inequalities crystallize when advantages endure over time, and the accumulation of advantages over time—people's life chances—is more strongly linked to an individual's occupation than to a single snapshot measure of earnings.[2]

Second, the idea of social class is to capture inequality in social relations in labor markets and workplaces, the focus therefore being on relational rather than distributional inequality—in inequality in human relations rather than in socially valued attributes such as income (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018, 14; Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010, 219). In this view, inequality between classes is the consequence of individuals' holding more or less advantageous positions within a society's division of labor, and these positions go hand in hand with different opportunities and constraints. Therefore, different positions in class relations also provide incumbents with more or less power and crucially affect people's worldviews and attitudes.

## 2.2. The Middle Class as Opposed to the Working Class

The widely held idea in economics that "middle class living standards begin when poverty ends" (Ravallion 2010, 446) is at odds with the Western history of industrialization, which saw the emergence of large working classes in the late nineteenth century (Cherlin 2014; Hobsbawm 1999; Thompson 1963). These working classes grew increasingly affluent during the postwar boom from 1950 to 1970 (Goldthorpe et al. 1969), but they entered into crisis in the 1980s (Todd 2014).

Historically, the middle class was the category below the small, but powerful, core of aristocrats and rentiers (who lived comfortably from their capital without having to work) and above the large masses of the laboring classes, including peasants, millworkers, day laborers, and domestic aides (who toiled in manual jobs and lived humbly, at best), without forgetting the lower middle classes, or *petite bourgeoisie*, composed of independent artisans as well as small inn owners and shop owners (Hobsbawm 1983, 291).

The distinction between the middle class and the working class is not only entrenched in everyday language—between workers and employees, blue-collar jobs and white-collar jobs, manual employment and nonmanual employment—it is also visible in the split between trade unions catering to white-collar employees and trade unions organizing blue-collar workers (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000) and, until recently, in separate social security systems for workers, employees, and civil servants in countries such as Austria or Germany (Kocka 1981, Palier 2010). These distinctions run counter to the idea that all the non-poor belong to a single homogenous middle class.

## 2.3. Defining the Upper, Middle, and Working Classes

The criterion for membership in the upper class initially was ownership of capital and later became control of large productive assets, notably ownership of, partnership in, or a commanding position within a firm, thus bringing together owners, employers, partners, and senior managers. The distinction between the middle class and the upper class is ambiguous. Although the upper class has economically thrived over the last few decades, it is numerically small—a very few percent at most (Piketty 2013)—and its members often think of themselves as upper-middle class (Chauvel 2020; Hobsbawm 1995).

The difficulty of defining the middle class has led many sociologists to avoid the term altogether. Historians Eric Hobsbawm (1995, 1999) and Jürgen Kocka (1995) provide useful assistance by describing the middle class as the category of individuals who have to work for a living, but do so using intellectual rather than manual skills, holding occupations that require higher levels of education. Higher education provides the members of the middle class with specialized skills and expertise that make it more costly for employers to replace them. Contrary to the laboring classes, the middle class thus benefits from employment relationships that have a long-term dimension, exemplified by annual salary increments and defined career paths (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Job stability and career opportunities, in turn, provide middle-class incumbents with a comfortable lifestyle that often includes house ownership and secure old-age pensions (Cherlin 2014), as well as the possibility to put aside savings and thus obtain some security against life's hazards (Piketty 2013). The middle class has been summarized as consisting of those individuals who have enough education and income to participate fully in a country's mainstream way of life (Wright 2009).

Below the middle class is the lower-middle class, which includes white-collar employees in clerical office jobs, self-employed artisans, and the petite bourgeoisie made up of small shopkeepers, innkeepers, and farmers (Hobsbawm 1999, 156; Mayer 1975, 410). Historically, the lower-middle class tried to keep its distance from the *working class*: the group of individuals that own no capital and have no higher education (Wright 2009, 106). Notably, exclusion from post-compulsory education leaves people with few options other than to rely on manual labor and accept jobs that are set at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy. To the extent that members of the working class lack specialized education, they are more easily replaced in the production process and exposed to stronger employer domination than are managers, professionals, or technicians. As a result, they often have to contend with short-term contracts and more frequently experience spells of unemployment (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Notably in the United States, having no more than high-school education has been increasingly used as a marker of the working class (Case and Deaton 2020; Cherlin 2014).

The core of the working class is constituted by manual workers in mining, manufacturing, construction, transports, and utilities, as well as domestic workers (Todd 2014). In addition, the working-class jobs also include many in interpersonal services, such as waitresses and cooks, sales assistants and nursing aides, security guards and home helpers. Historically, the middle class outnumbered the upper class; however, the middle class was, in turn, dwarfed by the working class for long periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hobsbawm 1999). In the middle of the twentieth century, Europe's middle class was still caught "between dazzling power above and massive numbers below" (Stearns 1979, 378).[3]

This discussion explains why it can be misleading to interpret job losses in occupations with median earnings as a signal of the erosion of the middle class. In most Western countries, bricklayers and electricians, carpenters and truck drivers earn wages close to the national average. However, to the extent that these occupations formed the backbone of the working class and trade unions, few sociologists would consider them as archetypical middle-class occupations.

## 3. A Model for Today's Class Structure

### 3.1. The Vertical Dimension of the Class Schema

For analytical purposes, scholars of social stratification may wish to distinguish the employment structure at a further level of detail than simply separating the middle class from the working class. One solution is to conceive the postindustrial class structure as being based on a vertical and horizontal dimension (Oesch 2006).

The vertical dimension in the class structure is uncontroversial. Most observers of social stratification distinguish the upper section of the middle class—professionals and managers—from the lower section, composed of semiprofessionals, associate managers, and technicians. A similar distinction is helpful within the working class to distinguish skilled occupations from low-skilled ones. While skilled working-class jobs typically require a few years of post-compulsory education—often in the form of vocational training—low-skilled working-class occupations resemble entry-level jobs that can be mastered after a few months of on-the-job training. Among the self-employed, large employers and liberal professions (such as lawyers or medical doctors) form the backbone of the upper(-middle) class and are distinguished from the lower-middle class made up of small business owners, typically shopkeepers, artisans, and farmers.

Whether researchers focus on more or less advantageous employment relations (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), the extent of marketable skills (Tåhlin 2007), or the volume of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979), the occupational hierarchy looks very similar because employment relations, education, skills, and volume of capital are closely associated (Tåhlin 2007)—and this association explains why stratification measures are strongly correlated (Bihagen and Lambert 2018). In what follows, I propose to empirically determine the vertical dimension by using an occupation's skill requirements, which provides a good proxy for the degree of advantage offered in the employment relationship.

## 3.2. The Horizontal Dimension of the Class Schema

More controversial is a second *horizontal* dimension that distinguishes different work logics (Oesch 2006). The idea is that, depending on whether an occupation involves the deployment of technical skills, administration of organizational power, or face-to-face attendance to people's personal demands, the daily work logic differs in fundamental ways. Within the middle class, a technician, an accountant, or a teacher may have similarly advantageous employment relationships and their occupation may require similar levels of education. However, the potential for the division of labor, the nature of authority relations, the ensuing primary orientations, and the type of skills required vary substantially. If classes "designate instances of similar interests that a given individuals shares with numerous others" (Weber [1922] 2005, 223), the horizontal distinction of work logics is useful, because it helps to understand the formation of people's subjective experience in the workplace.

Schematically, four work logics can be distinguished: (a) the *independent* work logic of employers and the self-employed; (b) the *technical* work logic of technical experts, technicians, craft workers, and assemblers; (c) the *organizational* work logic of managers, accountants, and office clerks; and (d) the *interpersonal* service logic of sociocultural (semi)professionals and service workers in healthcare, education, and social work. Within each work logic, there is a clear-cut relational hierarchy between dominant and subordinate classes. By combining four hierarchical levels with four work logics, one obtains the schema of sixteen classes shown in Table 1. Depending on the empirical problem at hand, this class schema can be merged into more parsimonious versions (notably an eight-class version; see Table A.1 in the appendix). Likewise, Table 1 shows how the sixteen classes collapse into four larger classes: the traditional upper-middle class, the salaried middle class, the lower-middle class, and the working class.

**Table 1.** A Sixteen-Class Schema Based on Four Vertical Levels of Skill Requirements and Four Horizontal Types of Work Logics

| | *Interpersonal service logic* | *Technical work logic* | *Organizational work logic* | *Independent work logic* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Tertiary education* | Socio-cultural professionals<br>Medical doctors<br>Professors | Technical professionals<br>IT-professionals<br>Engineers | Managers<br>Business professionals<br>Financial managers | Liberal professionals and large employers<br>Entrepreneurs<br>Self-employed lawyers |
| *Post-secondary* | Socio-cultural semi-professionals<br>Teachers<br>Social Workers | Technicians<br>Electrical technicians<br>Draughtspersons | Associate managers<br>Bookkeepers<br>Tax officials | Small business owners with employees<br>Restaurant owners<br>Farmers |
| *Upper-secondary* | Skilled service workers<br>Nursing assistants<br>Child care assistants | Skilled craft workers<br>Mechanics<br>Carpenters | Skilled office clerks<br>Secretaries<br>Cashiers & tellers | Small business owners without employees<br>Shop owners<br>Hairdressers |
| *Lower secondary* | Low-skilled service workers<br>Waiters<br>Home helpers | Low-skilled production workers<br>Assemblers<br>Construction labourers | Low-skilled office clerks<br>Mail sorting clerks<br>Call centre employees | Gig workers<br>Delivery workers<br>Taxi drivers |

Note: for each class, two typical occupations are put as examples.

The frames show how the 16 occupational classes collapse into 4 social classes.

**Black continuous**: traditional upper-middle class. **Black dashed**: salaried middle class. **Grey dashed**: lower-middle class. **Grey continuous**: working class.

The first advantage of horizontally differentiating the class structure is to make gender disparities visible. Whereas the interpersonal service logic primarily offers employment to women, men dominate in the technical work logic. Therefore, within the salaried middle class, women dominate the category of sociocultural (semi)professionals, whereas men represent the great majority among technical professionals and technicians. The same contrast applies to the working class, the category of interpersonal service workers being heavily female and the category of crafts and production workers being overwhelmingly male (Oesch 2006).

A second advantage is to point to differences in public and private sector employment. Public employees are heavily overrepresented in the interpersonal service logic, the welfare state being the main employer in health care, education, and social services across the Western world. At similar hierarchical levels classes thus evolve in different job contexts. Within the salaried middle class, sociocultural specialists are mostly employed in state-financed establishments, while managers and technical specialists predominantly work for private employers. Within the working class, service workers are more likely to work in entities financed by the public sector than are production workers, who are predominantly employed by private companies (Oesch 2006).

A third advantage is to link class analysis to the growing research on occupational task structures (Autor and Handel 2013; Fernández-Macías and Hurley 2017) and to show the distinctive task profiles of classes set in different work logics. While caring, serving, and teaching are dominant tasks in the interpersonal service logic, the use of information technology and machines defines the technical work logic, and coordinating tasks and teamwork are particularly relevant in the administrative work logic (Fernández-Macías and Bisello 2022).

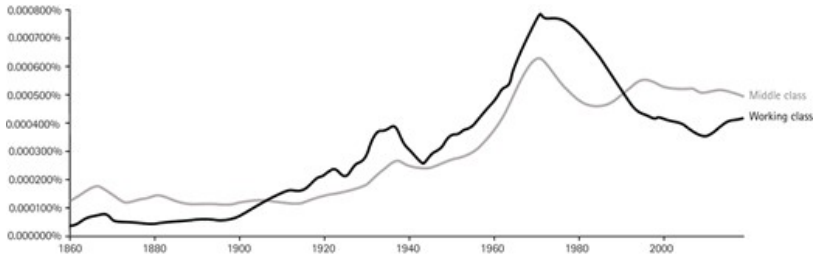
Finally, a fourth advantage of horizontally differentiating the class structure is to unearth differences in political attitudes. To the extent that full-time workers spend more than a third of their waking hours at their jobs, it seems plausible that the typical demands and social interactions of the workplace—an occupation's work logic—leave an imprint on individuals' political outlook (Ares 2020; Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). While sociocultural (semi)professionals have become strong supporters of left parties, managers lean toward parties of the center right, and small business owners disproportionately support the radical right (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

## 4. Shifts in Employment across Classes

### 4.1. The Working Class Fades from the Public Debate

The thesis of middle-class decline not only uses flawed concepts, but also reaches empirical conclusions that seem questionable. This becomes clear once we return to the debate's great absentee, the "working class"—a term that has largely disappeared from the vocabulary of politicians, journalists, and public agencies "as if it were pejorative" (Cherlin 2014, 128).[4] Evidence from Google's enormous corpus of books in English shows that the working class has also faded from scholarly debates over the last fifty years (see Figure 1). In the two postwar decades after 1945, the proportion of books using the term "working class" more than doubled, peaking in 1970. But with the end of the postwar boom and deindustrialization came a steady decrease in its usage that contrasts with the relative stability of the term "middle class." The term "working class" was dominant during large parts of the twentieth century (1907–1990), but in the early twenty-first century the term "middle class" has become more prominent again—as it was in the nineteenth century prior to large-scale industrialization.

**Figure 1.**




Proportion of books mentioning the terms *middle class* or *working class*.

Despite the falling prominence of appeals to the working-class in politics and the media, many citizens still view themselves as working class. Survey evidence on subjective class identity suggests that almost half of all Americans (Hout 2008) and more than half of all Britons (Evans and Mellon 2016) did not consider themselves middle class in the early twenty-first century but as working class (see also Oesch and Vigna 2023). At the same time, subjective class identities strongly depend on the wording of the questions used in surveys.

## 4.2. Employment Shifts across Social Classes

The usage of the two terms "working class" and "middle class" reflects to a large extent the trajectories of the two classes in the labor market. Table 2 illustrates the diverging destinies of the working class and the middle class for four European countries after 1990. Based on the European labor force survey, the table shows that in the early 1990s, the middle class was still largely outnumbered by the working class in Germany and Spain—and that the middle class and working class accounted for about the same proportion of the workforce in Sweden and the United Kingdom. In 1992, the middle class, consisting of managers, professionals, associate managers, semiprofessionals, and technicians accounted for a third of the labor force in Germany and almost 40 percent in the United Kingdom and Sweden, but only for 15 percent in Spain. By 2015, the employment share of the middle class had increased by between 14 (UK) and 21 (Spain) percentage points and represented half of the workforce in Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, and over a third in Spain.

**Table 2.** Proportion of the Workforce in Three Social Classes, 1992 and 2015 (in %)

| | Germany | | Spain | | Sweden | | UK | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **1992** | **2015** | **1992** | **2015** | **1997** | **2015** | **1992** | **2015** |
| Middle class[1] | 33 | 51 | 15 | 36 | 39 | 53 | 38 | 52 |
| Lower-middle class[2] | 21 | 18 | 33 | 23 | 20 | 13 | 26 | 20 |
| Working class[3] | 46 | 31 | 52 | 41 | 41 | 34 | 36 | 28 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Data from the European Labour Force Survey. Source: Oesch and Piccitto (2019, 459).

The analytical sample includes all workers, including employers and the self-employed, aged 20 to 64 working at least 20 hours per week in gainful employment. See Table A.1 in the appendix for more disaggregated results.

1 The middle class includes managers, professionals, technicians, associate managers, semiprofessional, and employers of nine or more employees (and hence also the numerically small upper class).

2 The lower-middle class includes office clerks as well as small business owners.

3 The working class includes craft workers, assemblers, operatives, and agricultural workers, as well as sales and service workers.

When we horizontally disaggregate the middle class according to the work logic, we observe that all three components of the salaried middle class—managers, technical experts, and sociocultural professionals—expanded their share of total employment. While sociocultural (semi)professionals represent a particularly large category in Sweden, (associate) managers make up a disproportionate employment share in the United Kingdom (see Table A.1 in the appendix).

The expansion of the middle class is mirrored by the decline of the working class between 1992 and 2015. In relative terms, the working class lost the most ground in Germany, where it decreased from almost half to a third of the workforce. Yet the decline was also substantial in Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. If we distinguish, within the working class, production workers in the technical work logic (such as craft workers, machine operators, and farmhands) from service workers in the interpersonal work logic (such as waiters, sales assistants, and nursing aides), we see that the drop in employment was concentrated among the former; whereas the employment share of service workers remained constant (Table A.1). In Germany and Spain, production workers accounted for a third of the workforce in the early 1990s, but were only a fifth of the workforce in the mid-2010s. In comparison, the traditional working class of production workers was already small in Sweden and the United Kingdom in the 1990s but further decreased in the 2000s.

In the early 1990s, about a fourth of the workforce was constituted by the lower- middle class, including small business owners with and without employees, as well as office clerks. The employment share of this heterogeneous class has decreased everywhere but most clearly in Spain, where the ranks of small business owners withered over the last two decades. In the United Kingdom, the lower-middle class also lost ground, but for another reason: technological change and offshoring reduced employment among office clerks (see Table A.1 in the appendix).

We can compare these proportions with the findings for the United Kingdom reported by Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2018), who use a similar class concept (the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification), but a different data source (UK census data). Between 1951 and 2011, the middle class—defined as higher and lower managerial and professional occupations—increased its proportion of the workforce from 11

percent to 40 percent among men, and from 8 percent to 30 percent among women (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018, 36). Over the same 1951–2011 period, the working class saw its share decrease from 55 percent to 30 percent among men and from 50 percent to 35 percent among women. These figures follow the same time trend and show similar orders of magnitude as the proportions presented in Table 2.

## 4.3. Middle-Class Expansion and Occupational Upgrading

The strong expansion of the managerial and professional salariat and the decline of the industrial working class was not limited to the four countries included in Table 2. Survey evidence for France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States shows that over the twentieth century, the members of every subsequent birth cohort were more likely to be employed in (upper-)middle class occupations and less likely to work in unskilled manual class positions (Breen and Müller 2020, 252).

A clear upgrading of the job structure has also been shown for France 1982–2018 (Goux and Maurin 2019), Ireland 1971–2006, and Switzerland 1970–2010 (Murphy and Oesch 2018). In the United States, over the period 1980–2015 employment not only expanded among well-paid occupational groups such as professionals, managers, and technicians, but also among low-paid personal service workers. By contrast, employment decreased among production workers, laborers, and office clerks (Autor 2020, 114).

The cross-national evidence is unambiguous for the salaried middle class, which experienced job growth, and for production workers and office clerks, who experienced job decline. However, it is less clear what happened to employment in routine sales and personal services. The employment share of these occupations expanded in the United States (Autor 2020; Dwyer and Wright 2019) and the United Kingdom (Goos and Manning 2007), leading to a polarized pattern of occupational change. By contrast, their proportion remained stable in many continental European countries, leading to occupational upgrading (Fernández-Macías 2012; Fernández-Macías and Hurley 2017; Oesch 2013; Oesch and Piccitto 2019).

Occupational upgrading is closely linked to educational expansion. Over the last few decades, educational attainment rose steadily in the Western world as increasing shares of subsequent cohorts graduated from universities and technical colleges (OECD 2019). Rising educational attainment was partly a consequence of working-class decline and the decreasing availability of stable entry-level jobs in manufacturing. As demand for semiskilled production workers dried up after the 1970s, many children in working-class families remained in school longer and obtained higher levels of education than their parents (Breen and Müller 2020). In the "race between education and technology," the constant expansion of educational attainment was crucial to allow labor supply to keep up with skill-biased technological change and the growing demand for qualified workers (Katz and Goldin 2008).

Skill-biased technological change and educational expansion increased employment opportunities for the salaried middle class. However, they put an end to "the century of the working class" (Todd 2014) that began after 1918 and ended in the early 2000s. The political, economic, and social consequences of working-class decline have been far-reaching.

# 5. Consequences of Working-Class Decline

## 5.1. Political Consequences of Working-Class Decline

From the early 1900s up to the 1980s, the dominant question in European politics revolved around the place that the working class should occupy in society (Esping-Andersen 1990). In the early twenty-first century, this is no longer the case, because the public focus has shifted to the "condition of the middle class" (Mau 2015, 2).

The changing political priorities are a direct consequence of the demographic shifts in the employment structure shown in Table 2 above. As technological progress and globalization gradually decimated the ranks of production workers, the working class lost its status as the uncontested majority class. After the end of the 1970s, the working class came under pressure, both from below, because of mass unemployment and the spread of atypical employment, and from above, as the growing ranks of professionals and managers increasingly marginalized it within the group of wage earners (Castel 1999).

These shifts in the job structure also weakened the traditional political allies of the working class: trade unions and social-democratic parties. Between 1980 and 2018, the proportion of wage earners in trade unions dropped by half in the Western world as union density decreased from 52 percent to 23 percent in the United Kingdom, from 35 percent to 17 percent in Germany, from 22 percent to 10 percent in the United States, and from 19 percent to 9 percent in France (OECD statistics). The only exceptions were Belgium and the Scandinavian countries, where trade unions, bolstered by the Ghent system of unemployment insurance, succeeded in organizing the growing numbers of workers in health, education, and social welfare (Bryson et al. 2011; Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000).[5]

The changes in the employment structure also put pressure on social-democratic and labor parties (Kitschelt 1993). In Europe, these parties had obtained their highest electoral scores ever during the two decades of the postwar industrial boom, the 1950s and 1960s. Yet in the wake of deindustrialization and occupational upgrading, their electoral scores decreased in each subsequent decade from the 1970s to the 2010s (Delwit 2021, 10). Confronted with a shrinking working class and the uncomfortable prospect of becoming niche parties, social-democratic and labor parties began in the 1990s to court the salaried middle class (Rennwald 2020). Clear examples were the governments led by Tony Blair in the United Kingdom and Gerhard Schröder in Germany that jointly pledged allegiance to a third way—to a new center—between socialism and capitalism (Giddens 2013). They no longer emphasized the working class "but hailed a middle class revolution"[6]—because, as Labour deputy prime minister John Prescott allegedly remarked in 1997, "We're all middle class now" (Evans and Mellon 2016, 2).

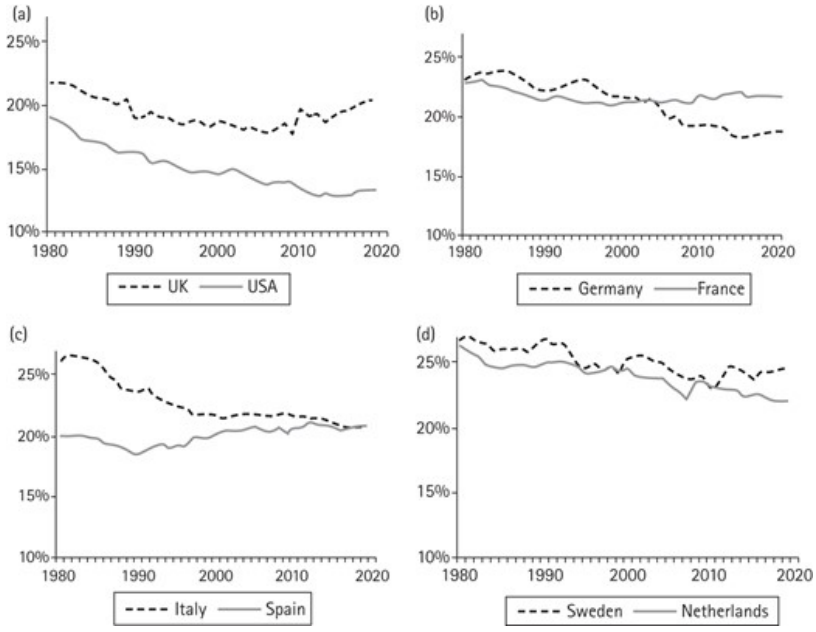
As social-democratic parties shifted their appeal from the working to the middle class and moved toward the center on economic issues, conflict between the left and the right on economic policy diminished (Kriesi et al. 2008; Rennwald and Evans 2014). Yet as economic conflict decreased, cultural conflict over issues of community and identity—notably migration, religion, and European integration—became more salient for parties and citizens. Based on a conservative stance on cultural issues, the radical right successfully attracted working-class voters who had been orphaned by the social-democratic move toward the middle class and the economic center (Betz and Meret 2012). In parallel, the left gained increasing support among the culturally liberal members of the middle class, notably, among sociocultural professionals. The result was a fundamental realignment of class voting in Europe over the two first decades of the twenty-first century (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

## 5.2. Economic Consequences of Working-Class Decline

Decreasing labor demand for less-educated workers and decreasing union density also weakened the economic clout of the working class. In the 1980s, the Keynesian class compromise came to an end. The almost forgotten plight of mass unemployment returned and the grand bargain of the postwar decades between workers and employers fell apart, terminating the exchange of decent wages and stable employment against hard and often dull work (Cherlin 2014; Hall 2013, 134).

In the Western world, income inequality fell to its lowest level of the twentieth century in 1980, but began to rise again thereafter (Piketty 2019, 37). Between 1980 and 2019, the bottom half of the adult population received a declining share of national income in many Western countries (see Figure 2). Over this period, the proportion of total national income going to the bottom half—and thus, roughly, to the working class—decreased from 19 percent to 13 percent in the United States, from 23 percent to 18 percent in Germany, and from 26 percent to 21 percent in Italy. The bottom half also lost out in France, the Netherlands, and Sweden, but the decline was more moderate. Finally, in Spain and the United Kingdom the evolution was marked by trendless fluctuations.

**Figure 2.**




Share of pretax national income going to the bottom 50 percent of the adult population, 1980–2019.

As a result of its diminishing bargaining power, the working class not only lost out in relative financial terms, but also treaded water in absolute terms. The evolution of median household income, corrected for inflation, gives a good idea of how living conditions evolved for "ordinary people," notably, members of the skilled working class. The median household saw its income increase, in constant prices, by only .3 percent per year in the United States between 1979 and 2013 and by .5 in Germany between 1984 and 2010 (Nolan and Thewissen 2018). Median households experienced more substantial income growth in Sweden (1.8 percent annually between 1983 and 2013) and the United Kingdom(1.6 percent per year between 1979 and 2013; Nolan 2020; Nolan and Thewissen 2018). Yet overall, growth rates in median incomes were much slower than the income gains made by the working class over the previous decades. More importantly, they were also dwarfed by the income gains obtained by the top 10 percent and, above all, 1 percent of the population after the 1980s (Piketty 2013, 2019).

The income evolution of the working class was particularly dire in the United States. Corrected for inflation, the median wages of American men have been stagnant for half a century (Case and Deaton 2020, 7). Men aged 30 with only a high-school degree earned 20 percent less in 1996 than did the same demographic group in 1979 (Cherlin 2014, 16). Except for the Great Depression, these working-class men were the first generation of American men to earn less than their fathers did. Over the same period, the wage returns to tertiary education had steadily increased in the United States, driving a wedge between the earnings prospects of the working class and the upper-middle class (Autor 2014; Lleras-Muney 2017).

For the working class, the slow evolution of earnings went hand in hand with renewed fear of job loss as the specter of mass unemployment returned in the 1980s in many countries, particularly in Southern Europe. As the labor market for the working class deteriorated, many low-educated Europeans found themselves unemployed and many low-educated American men withdrew from the labor market altogether, their workforce participation falling steadily over the last two decades (Case and Deaton 2017, 429).

The weaker bargaining power of the working class is not only reflected in decreasing shares of national income and stagnating real incomes. It also shows in the reduction of industrial conflict. In advanced capitalist countries, strike activity fell to historically low levels in the 2000s and 2010s as compared to the 1960s and 1970s (Van der Velden et al. 2007; Vandaele 2016). The trajectory of declining strikes closely mirrors the downward trend in union density (Brandl and Traxler 2010; Kelly 2015)—and the two phenomena are unambiguous signals of the waning economic power wielded by the working class.

## 5.3. Cultural and Social Consequences of Working-Class Decline

Over the late twentieth century, the working class not only declined as an economic and political force, but also saw its social status—understood as social recognition and esteem—come under threat. While class arises from the social relations of labor markets and has an objective economic basis, social status is rooted in a symbolic cultural hierarchy. It is thus based on subjective perceptions that people hold more or less reputable positions in society (Chan and Goldthorpe 2004; Gidron and Hall 2017; Weber [1922] 2005, 683).

An influential argument holds that the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s made individuals' market success more central for social status. While the social status of professionals and managers increased, lower-skilled workers were forced to accept less secure, lower-paid jobs, which, at the same time, provided increasingly weak social recognition (Gidron and Hall 2017; Hall and Lamont 2013). Growing segments of the working class have thus come to believe that they obtain less than what they deserve, not only in terms of material rewards but also social recognition (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016).

There is an ethnic and gender dimension to this argument (Gidron and Hall 2017). The fall in subjective social status may be particularly strong among White working-class men, whose rank in the social hierarchy has been additionally challenged by women's and ethnic minorities' quest for equal rights. Ethnographic research from the United States suggests that women and minorities are seen by increasingly frustrated working-class men as "cutting in line" in the long and unsuccessful wait for economic progress (Hochschild 2016; also Cramer 2016).

Survey results from Europe and the United States only provide lukewarm evidence for this narrative. While unskilled workers everywhere perceive their subjective social status to be lower than that of middle-class incumbents, there is no clear downward trend in their subjective social status over the last three decades. Unskilled workers had already been at the bottom of the status hierarchy in the early 1990s—and they were still there at the end of the 2010s (Oesch and Vigna 2021).

The consequences of working-class decline extend to family life as workers' loss of economic security may also have contributed to the unmooring of stable homes and family life. As labor market opportunities

declined, the marriage markets became more difficult for lower-educated men in the United States (Autor et al. 2019; Wilson 1996). Cherlin (2014) describes the joint erosion of workers' employment relations and family life and argues that the members of America's working class experienced the casualization of their lives, in the sense of becoming increasingly casual, informal, and unstructured—at work and at home. Not only have employment contracts become short-term and informal, providing little stability and even less long-term opportunity. The same casualization has also taken place in the realm of family, as young working-class adults shifted from marriage to less stable cohabiting unions as the context for having children (Cherlin 2014, 173).[7]

This argument is consistent with the reversal in the educational gradient of divorce. The more highly educated had been more likely to divorce over much of the twentieth century when divorce was a rare and stigmatized event that required legal and financial resources. However, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the lower-educated have substantially higher divorce rates in a growing number of Western countries (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Kalmijn and Leopold 2021). In the United Kingdom, coming from a working-class origin was associated with lower levels of family dissolution in the cohort born between 1925 and 1945; whereas the same origin showed a greatly increased the dissolution risk for later birth cohorts. Among members of the 1965 to 1979 birth cohort, the risk of family dissolution is almost twice as large among the offspring of low-skilled working-class parents than among the offspring of upper-middle class parents (Di Nallo and Oesch 2021). As the employment relationships of the working class have become more casual and unstable, their partnerships and family lives have also come unmoored.

The most tangible sign that the quality of life has declined for the working class comes from rising mortality rates among low-educated middle-aged Whites in the United States—a rise that is mainly due to an increase in "deaths of despair": premature deaths due to suicide, drugs, and alcohol (Case and Deaton 2020). As a consequence, the life expectancy of the White working class fell in the United States in the early 2000s—a fall that is historically exceptional for periods without major political upheaval (Case and Deaton 2017).

## 6. Conclusion

The chapter started out by taking aim at the thesis of middle-class decline, arguing that this thesis could only be upheld if the middle class were to include, at its lower end, basically all workers except the very poor (thus also assemblers, cleaners, and construction workers) and to exclude, at its upper end, the top third of the income distribution. This would mean excluding from the middle class pharmacists and therapists, accountants and journalists, postsecondary teachers and psychologists, architects and computer programmers. Although these occupations typically belong to the top third of the earnings distribution,[8] it seems a stretch to consider them as forming society's upper class.

Crucially, the thesis of middle-class decline only makes sense in a world without a working class. To the extent that the working class represented the uncontested majority of the labor force over much of the twentieth century (Crouch 1999), one can only define the middle class as some intermediate income category by completely ignoring the history of industrial society. However, once we admit the existence of a working class, labor force data make it clear that the middle class—notably its salaried component—has not declined but, on the contrary, bloomed over the last few decades. Never in the history of the Western world have so many people worked in managerial, professional, and technical jobs that require higher education as at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In contrast, a look at labor force surveys makes it hard to deny the decline of the working class. This decline began in the 1970s, which mark both the high point and end of the golden age of industrial capitalism. The postwar boom from 1946 to 1973 was defined by strong economic growth, broadly shared income rises, and

low unemployment. After the breakdown of the Bretton Woods monetary system and two oil crises, in 1973 and 1979, the 1980s were the watershed decade when mass unemployment and wage stagnation reappeared in many Western countries (Eichengreen 2008). Together with technological change, globalization, and the neoliberal turn in economic policy, these trends heralded the demise of the working-class century (Todd 2014).

I would then argue that current turmoil in politics, notably the rise of the radical right, and economics, notably the increase in income inequality, is closely linked to the declining size and power of the working class. As its numbers decreased, its economic and political clout diminished, trade unions became smaller and left parties turned toward the growing salaried middle class. Weaker political allies further reduced the bargaining power of a working class that was already under great pressure because of skill-biased technological change. As a consequence, earnings no longer rose for the bottom half of the population, and income inequality increased in many countries, notably the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany (OECD 2011; Piketty 2013, 2019). In parallel, as the traditional parties were seen as no longer delivering any improvement in the standard of living, they saw their support plummet among the working class, which began to prefer the angry protest of the radical right (Betz and Meret 2012).

This is the chapter's main thesis of working-class decline. However, I readily admit the limitation of only focusing on the trajectories of the two largest social classes, the rising salaried middle class and the declining working class. In doing so, the analysis ignores two blind spots of class sociology: the small but powerful 1 percent elite at the top, and the underclass of the down and out at the bottom. Although political scientists (Hacker and Pierson 2010) and economists (Alvaredo et al. 2013; Piketty 2013) have put the elite of top earners under the spotlight, scholars of social stratification have struggled to integrate them into their concepts and empirical analyzes (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021; Savage 2015). This is unfortunate, because the salaried middle class has indisputably done well in quantitative terms as measured by the number of jobs, but less well in qualitative terms as measured by earnings growth. The reason is simple: over the last three decades a disproportionate share of national incomes in the Western world went to the top 1 percent (Piketty 2013, 2019). Although this group is numerically small, it holds disproportionate power and resources (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

A second issue that this chapter ignored and that is also mostly overlooked by survey-based class analysis concerns the very poor—the fringe of population that is largely excluded from wage labor and may thus not belong to the working class, but rather to an underclass of the truly disadvantaged (Wilson 1987). As with the small group of top earners, mainstream class analysis has not paid much attention to this group at the bottom of the social hierarchy. One reason is that the underclass is difficult to reach and therefore often flies under the radar of survey-based research. Luckily, over the last decade, a few outstanding ethnographies have stepped in and shed light on the phenomenon in the United States, notably on underclass communities living on less than two dollars a day (Edin and Shaefer 2015) and on the central role played by unstable housing conditions in trapping the underclass in poverty (Desmond 2016).

These omissions suggest that there is still a lot of research to be done in class analysis. To the extent that social class not only affects individuals' life chances, but is also a crucial constituent of their identity, it remains a central concept that provides major sociological insight.

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## Notes

1 For examples in the United States, see *New York Times*, "What's Really Squeezing the Middle Class?," April 25, 2007; *Financial Times*, "The Crisis of Middle Class America," July 30, 2010; and *Wall Street Journal*, "The Middle Class Squeeze," September 25, 2015. For Germany, see *Spiegel*, "Deutschlands Mittelschicht schrumpft dramatisch," December 13, 2012; and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, "Schrumpfende Mittelschicht: Arbeite hart, aber besser geht es dir nicht," August 29, 2015.

2 Note, however, that recent research in sociology has improved the "snapshot measures" by using indicators of permanent income that proxy lifetime average incomes (Brady et al. 2018).

3 The class structure prior to twentieth century was even more tilted toward the lower classes. The military engineer Comte de Vauban described the social structure in France in 1698 as follows: "Rich: 10 per cent; very poor: 50 per cent; near beggars: 30 per cent; beggars: 10 per cent" (Cipolla 1994, 10). The polymath Francis Galton described the British class structure in the late nineteenth century as being composed, at the bottom, of 20 percent criminals and paupers, followed by 20 percent of poor and low-paid; 20 percent of the "respectable" working class; 20 percent of skilled workers, foremen, clerks, and small tradesmen; and, at the top, 20 percent of professionals and large employers (Goldthorpe 2021, 46).

4 An example is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report "Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class" (OECD 2019), which mentions the middle class over two hundred times, but makes only one reference to the working class.

5 The Ghent system of unemployment insurance turns unions into gatekeepers of unemployment insurance and thereby creates selective incentives for union membership.

6 In 1999, the new prime minister, Tony Blair, invited Labour supporters to join his shift from "the old establishment to a new, larger, more meritocratic middle class" (*The Guardian*, "Blair Hails Middle Class Revolution," January 15, 1999).

7 Interestingly, former Marine and current Republican United States senator J. D. Vance provides a similar account in his memoir about growing up in Ohio's Appalachia: "As the manufacturing center of the industrial Midwest has hollowed out, the white working class has lost both its economic security and the stable home and family life that comes with it" (Vance 2016, 5).

8 The US Bureau of Labor Statistics provides detailed information on median wages by micro-occupations. See "Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics" on the bureau's website, https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm, accessed June 22, 2021.

# Appendix

**Table A.1.** Change in Employment across Classes. Percentage of Total Employment in 1992 and 2015

| | **Interpersonal service logic** | **Technical work logic** | **Organizational work logic** | **Independent work logic** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sociocultural (semi)professionals | Technical (semi)professionals | (Associate) managers | Liberal professionals and large employers |
| Germany | 10 → 12 | 8 →10 | 13 → 23 | 2 → 4 |
| Spain | 7 → 11 | 2 → 7 | 4 → 15 | 2 → 3 |
| Sweden[1] | 15 → 15 | 9 → 12 | 14 → 23 | 1 → 3 |
| UK | 11 → 11 | 6 → 9 | 18 → 27 | 3 → 4 |
| | Interpersonal service workers | Production workers | Office clerks | Small business owners |
| Germany | 16 → 13 | 31 → 21 | 14 → 13 | 7 → 6 |
| Spain | 21 → 21 | 31 → 20 | 12 → 9 | 21 → 14 |
| Sweden[1] | 21 → 20 | 20 → 15 | 11 → 7 | 6 → 6 |
| UK | 15 → 16 | 21 → 12 | 16 → 10 | 10 → 10 |

Data from the European Labour Force Survey. Source: Oesch and Piccitto (2019, 459)

1 The period under study is 1997–2015 for Sweden.

The analytical sample includes all workers, including employers and the self-employed, aged 20 to 64 and working at least 20 hours per week in gainful employment. The statistical code for this class scheme is available on the author's website: https://people.unil.ch/danieloesch/scripts/.

Reading example: in Germany, sociocultural (semi)professionals comprised 10% of total employment in 1992 and increased their share of total employment to 12% in 2015.