



Industrialization and Social Class

Social Class

Class is a complex term, in use since the late eighteenth century, and employed in many different ways. In our context classes are the more or less distinct social groupings which at any given historical period, taken as a whole, constituted British Society. Different social classes can be (and were by the classes themselves) distinguished by inequalities in such areas as power, authority, wealth, working and [living conditions](#), life-styles, life-span, education, religion, and culture.

Early in the nineteenth century the labels "working classes" and "[middle classes](#)" were already coming into common usage. The old hereditary aristocracy, reinforced by the new gentry who owed their success to commerce, industry, and the professions, evolved into an "upper class" (its consciousness formed in large part by the [Public Schools](#) and Universities) which tenaciously maintained control over the political system, depriving not only the working classes but the middle classes of a voice in the political process. The increasingly powerful (and class conscious) middle classes, however, undertook organized agitation to remedy this situation: the passage of the [Reform Act](#) of 1832 and the abolition of the [Corn Laws](#) in 1846 were intimations of the extent to which they would ultimately be successful.

The working classes, however, remained shut out from the political process, and became increasingly hostile not only to the aristocracy but to the middle classes as well. As the Industrial Revolution progressed there was further social stratification. Capitalists, for example, employed industrial workers who were one

component of the working classes (each class included a wide range of [occupations](#) of varying status and income; there was a large gap, for example, between skilled and unskilled labor), but beneath the industrial workers was a submerged "under class"-- contemporaries referred to them as the "sunken people"-- which lived in poverty. In mid-century skilled workers had acquired enough power to enable them to establish Trade Unions (Socialism became an increasingly important political force) which they used to further improve their status, while unskilled workers and the underclass beneath them remained much more susceptible to exploitation, and were therefore exploited.

This basic hierarchical structure (presented here in highly oversimplified form), comprising the "upper classes," the "middle classes," the "Working Classes" (with skilled laborers at one extreme and unskilled at the other), and the impoverished "Under Class," remained [relatively stable](#) despite periodic (and frequently violent) upheavals, and despite the Marxist view of the inevitability of class conflict, at least until the outbreak of World War I. A modified class structure clearly remains in existence today.

Race and Class Overview: Parallels in Racism and Class Prejudice

Both [Victorian science](#) (pseudosciences such as [phrenology](#)), and popular literature assigned similar [characteristics](#) to the [Irish](#), Blacks and members of the [lower classes](#). Both were seen as:

- [Unreasonable, irrational, and easily excited](#)
- [Childlike](#)
- [Having no religion](#) but only superstition.
- [Criminal](#): no respect for private property, no [notions of property](#)
- [Excessively sexual](#)
- [Filthy](#)
- [Sharing physical qualities](#)

Inhabitants of unknown dark lands or territories ([Mayhew](#)).