



C | L | A | S | S **ACTION**

Building Bridges Across the Class Divide

Assumptions about Addressing Class and Classism

- 1. Class issues are taboo and hard to talk about in America.** Class issues are shrouded in secrecy and rarely openly examined, let alone discussed. Talking about class often brings up strong feelings (we're talking about survival issues), these feelings may be different depending on our class position (e.g. shame and/or guilt); people from all classes have intense feelings about it.
- 2. Classism does not exist in isolation.** Each of us is complex; we belong to many different social groups which impact our experience of class. Class issues clearly intersect with other aspects of personal identity such as race and gender. In the US, race and class have been particularly intertwined.
- 3. Class is misunderstood.** Most people in the United States don't have an accurate class identity and have little language to talk about class. Differences in class conditioning and culture can lead to tensions and misunderstandings in mixed class relationships and organizations. Stereotypes go both ways, this is different from systemic classism.
- 4. Class is complex.** Class is not just about income, or even wealth. Other attributes, such as status, social networks, lifestyles, cultural norms, control over one's life and, most importantly, access to power, are as critical in understanding our class identity.
- 5. The myth of a "classless society" is destructive.** In spite of growing and profound inequality, we have managed to perpetuate the myth of classlessness in the United States. Denial about the realities of class is a barrier to organizing among working and middle classes, and is part of the explanation for why these groups may vote against their class interests.
- 6. Our class backgrounds are formative.** Our class position may change over time, however, our class conditioning from childhood affects us throughout our lives. We all derive strengths as well as limitations from our class background; none of us asked to be taught the oppressive beliefs we have learned. Change hinges on our ability to separate fault from response-ability.
- 7. People have varying experiences with class.** Everyone's at a different place with respect to understanding/expertise on issues related to class. Our national class-consciousness has ebbed and flowed throughout history. We're currently at a threshold of increased consciousness. Learning about class/classism is an on-going process. We won't learn everything today.
- 8. Classism is an important factor in the current economic crisis.** The extraordinary economic inequality since the 1980s created an unstable dual reality in America: a vast working and middle class who have seen stagnating wages and a massive build-up of debt, juxtaposed with a small, powerful elite who have seen exponential increases in wealth.
- 9. Classism hurts everyone.** It is not just the poor who suffer from classism and economic inequality. The shrinking middle class feels increasingly vulnerable and the owning class feels increasingly disconnected and isolated. Today's environmental crisis is directly related to classism. It is in the best interests of everyone to work against classism toward a more equitable and just society.
- 10. Class position and class consciousness are not the same.** Knowing someone's class position

doesn't tell you about their class consciousness or their politics. For example, there are people from owning class backgrounds who are actively using their power and privilege to work against classism.

11. **We can all become authentic anti-classist allies.** Differences in class conditioning and class culture can lead to misunderstandings/tensions in mixed class relationships/organizations. There are multiple avenues toward change: personal, institutional and cultural. Taking small steps; together we can chip away at the system of classism and build toward a more just society.

Definitions

What Is Class?

- Class is the relative social rank in terms of **education, income, wealth (assets), status/position and/or power, and aspirations/expectations.**
- Class is comprised of.
 - **Economic Capital** – The command over economic resources (cash, assets).
 - **Cultural Capital** – The forms of knowledge, skill, education, and any advantages a person has which give her or him a higher status in society.
 - **Social Capital** – Resources based on group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support.
- Class affects people not only on an economic level, but also on an emotional level.

What Is Classism?

The institutional, cultural, and individual practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class; *and* an economic system that creates excessive inequality and causes basic human needs to go unmet.

Circles of Classism

Classism shows up in many different forms in our lives. We might think of the ways classism affects us as *expanding circles*.

- **Individual:** The internalized inferiority of the less class advantaged and internalized superiority of those with more advantage affect how we treat ourselves and each other.
 - Internalized Classism for working class people and those living in poverty may lead to feelings of inferiority in relation to middle and owning-class people, hostility and blame towards others in their own class, and beliefs that classist institutions/policies are fair. Middle and owning class people may have feelings of superiority to those with less advantage, a sense of entitlement, and rationalizations of classist policies and institutions. Both are forms of internalized classism.
 - Class Privilege accrues to those with more class status and includes both tangible and intangible unearned advantages, such as personal contacts with employers and educational institutions, good childhood health care, inherited money, and speaking with the same dialect and accent as people with institutional power.
- **Interpersonal:** Both subtle and overt attitudes toward people from other classes affect how we treat each other and whether or not we feel accepted. Becoming aware of our own classist feelings can help us move toward greater acceptance of people from different class backgrounds.
- **Cultural:** Pervasive beliefs or ideologies of individualism, meritocracy and equal opportunity vs. greater equity contribute to cultural classism, as do some practices in families/communities.
- **Organizational:** Classism is embedded in many of the policies and practices of our organizations, including faith communities. Organizational classism can be changed by the growing awareness of congregations and commitment to justice and equity.
- **Systemic:** Policies and practices are embedded in our major social institutions that benefit the more class advantaged at the expense of classes on the other side of the spectrum. These policies can only be changed by organized effort of many citizens.

Working Descriptions of Class Identities

The United States has no hard and fast divisions between class groups. Income and wealth are both on spectrums, and most of us move up or down the spectrums during our lifetimes. Some people grow up in one class and live as adults in another. For immigrants, there's another layer of complexity, as their class status in their country of origin is often different from their class status in the United States. There are many classification systems, with different numbers and names for class groups. Nevertheless, it can be useful for understanding class dynamics to place people roughly into these seven groups.

Persistent poverty: Less than a high school education. Outside the mainstream labor market, with significant unmet basic needs. May experience periods of homelessness, live in substandard housing, or seek public housing and other forms of assistance.

Working but still poor: May have a high school education and a full-time job, but still living below the poverty line with unmet needs. May rely on public assistance for housing, food, or healthcare.

Working class: High school degree and sometimes vocational education. In supervised wage jobs or hands-on small business. Renting or modest homeownership.

Lower middle class: Relatively stable and decent-paying working-class jobs or small businesses. May live in marginally middle-class neighborhoods, but lack social and occupational prestige.

Professional middle class: Four-year college degree or more and in professional/managerial jobs with relatively more autonomy and often higher income and security. Homeownership in safe community with good schools.

Upper middle class: College and graduate degree or business success, enabling home ownership in communities with excellent schools. Trading up to bigger homes.

Owning class: Elite private schools and colleges. Enough income-producing assets to not *need* to work, and with multiple homes or a luxury home.

Mobile Class Identities

“Upwardly mobile”: Gaining more class advantage, particularly in terms of education, income and neighborhood. In earlier eras such mobility was enabled by the GI Bill, federal housing loans, and Affirmative Action policies. Without such social programs, there is far less upward mobility today.

Voluntarily “downwardly mobile”: From professional middle class, upper middle class or owning class background or life-style. Some people choose to not pursue a professional career for political, artistic or environmental values and down-size their housing and/or lifestyle to establish a smaller ecological footprint.

Involuntarily “downwardly mobile”: Because of health crises and disabilities, addictions, crashed economy, bankruptcy, war or other traumas, people from the professional middle class or upper middle class may end up in poverty or working class.

Class Action's Vision

A world without classism:

- Meets everyone's basic needs
- Treats people from every background, class status and rank with dignity and respect
- Supports the development of all people to their full potential
- Reduces the vast differences in income, wealth and access to resources
- Ensures everyone has a voice in the decisions that affect them

Classism Materials That Class Action Sold

Born on Third Base: A One Percenter Makes the Case for Tackling Inequality, Bringing Wealth Home, and Committing to the Common Good. Book by Chuck Collins.

Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures, Book by Betsy Leondar-Wright

Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America, Book by Barbara Jensen

99 to 1: How Wealth Inequality is Wrecking the World and What We Can Do About It, Book by Chuck Collins

Created Equal, 40-module curriculum: The only high school curriculum on class and classism

Talking Across the Class Divide: Cross-Class Dialogue Manual, Class Action's founders guide others to replicate their transformative experience

Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle Class Activists, Book by Betsy Leondar-Wright

The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide

Enough DVD and curriculum, Conversation-provoking 11-minute video created by 13-year-old Zoe Greenberg

The Power of the Past: Understanding Cross-Class Marriages. Book by professor and researcher Jessi Streib

Class Lives: Stories from across our economic divides – 40 first-person stories, edited by Chuck Collins, Jennifer Ladd, Maynard Seider, Felice Yeskel

A few more good books about class:

hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters.* Routledge, 2000

Lubrano, Al, *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams,* John Wiley & Sons, 2003

Stout, Linda, *Bridging the Class Divide and other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing,* Beacon, 1996

Tea, Michelle, *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class,* Seal Press, 2004

Zweig, Michael. *The Working-Class Majority.* 2nd ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011