

THE WORKING CLASS MAJORITY

America's Best Kept Secret

Second Edition

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, a newspaper comic strip pictured a campus radical proclaiming his solidarity with the class struggle, only to be ridiculed by his professor, who dismissed him with a sharp retort: “The only classes in this country are in schools!” This remark pretty much sums up the conventional view of class in the United States: it doesn’t exist.

This book challenges that view. It is about classes, but not the schoolroom kind. It is about social classes and class relations in the United States that not only continue to exist but, as readers will discover, exert tremendous influence over all of us.

When I talk about class, I am talking about power. Power at work, and power in the larger society. Economic power, and also political and cultural power. As I explore the class structure of the U.S. economy, I will be describing the contours of power that operate in every aspect of society, to the benefit of some, to the burden of others.

We all experience class, in different ways we are treated, in different lifestyles, in different parts of town. Some people are called “high class,” others “low class,” depending on their table manners, how loudly they talk in public places, or their choice of movies and magazines. One place where class is pretty sharply defined is in the sky. In the 1980s and 1990s, airlines rearranged their planes in ways that mirrored what was going on in the rest of society. The first-class section,

servicing a tiny minority of passengers, expanded. The seats became more comfortable, the food more sumptuous. Meanwhile, in the back of the plane, coach class got more cramped and even the peanuts disappeared.

Some aspects of class are more openly acknowledged than others. In this book, I explore aspects that are usually overlooked or denied, especially the way classes are structured by economic power. This book makes three basic points:

First, economic classes exist in U.S. society. I will describe who is in them and measure their sizes. It will become clear that the United States is not a mostly middle class society. We will see that the working class is the majority.

Second, class has a pervasive influence on the way we live, work, and think. Class is not just an abstract idea to score debating points. We will come to understand a wide range of important issues very differently when we look at them through the lens of class.

Third, class has great influence on politics—electoral politics and the more general contests of power that operate throughout society. This is true whether we recognize classes openly or not. By looking at issues through the lens of class, we can be clearer about what is at stake, and begin to see the potential for profound political realignments during the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

It is ironic that Americans pay much less attention to class than Europeans do, since American history is so full of violent armed conflict between workers and their employers. These conflicts are more widespread and more recent than anything in the history of European industrial relations. From the general strike of 1877 to Telluride and Bloody Harlan, from the GM workers' forty-four-day sit-down strike in Flint to more recent strikes by miners at Pittston's coal operations in southwest Virginia, by meatpackers in Minnesota, and by thousands of workers in the "war zone" of central Illinois, classes and open class struggle have been a persistent presence in U.S. history, up until the present day in Wisconsin and wherever public-sector workers are under attack.

Despite this history of intense class conflict, the most common myth about classes in the United States is that a vast middle class contains the overwhelming majority of our people. In this view, a small group of rich people lives at the top. Some are successful business leaders with names like Forbes, Rockefeller, Gates, Trump. Some are glamorous sports and entertainment stars, the Kobe Bryants and Lady Gagas of the world. As the saying goes, the very rich are different from you and me.

The dominant myth also recognizes a social fringe of poor people below the great middle class, sometimes called the "underclass." The poor are at the lower margins of society, pictured as different, lazy, damaged, scary enough so that we want to stay out of their neighborhoods. The poor are beneath the supposed vast middle class, who work hard and play by the rules, making a life through hard work and sacrifice.

The trouble with this story is that it hides an important reality. By looking only at income or lifestyle, we see the results of class, but not the origins of class. We see how we are different in our possessions, but not how we are related and connected, and made different, in the process of making what we possess.

Certainly a relatively few rich people do sit at the top of the income distribution, and a relatively small number of people are at the very bottom, with most people somewhere in between. But where to draw the lines—what is rich, what is poor, what is middle—is largely arbitrary. And just looking at a person's income doesn't tell us anything about how the person got the income, what role he or she plays in society, how he or she is connected to the power grid of class relations.

I define classes in large part based on the power and authority people have at work. The workplace engages people in more than their immediate work, by which they create goods and services. It also engages them in relationships with each other, relationships that are controlled by power. A relative handful of people have great power to organize and direct production, while a much larger number have almost no authority. In a capitalist society such as ours, the first group is the capitalist class, the second group is the working class.

The great majority of Americans form the working class. They are skilled and unskilled, in

manufacturing and in services, men and women of all races, nationalities, religions. They drive trucks, write routine computer code, operate machinery, wait tables, sort and deliver the mail, work on assembly lines, stand all day as bank tellers, perform thousands of jobs in every sector of the economy. For all their differences, working class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace or content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss. They produce the wealth of nations, but receive from that wealth only what they can buy with the wages their employers pay them. When we add them all up, they account for over 60 percent of the labor force. They are the working class majority.

There is also a middle class, of course. It includes professional people, small business owners, and managers and supervisors who have authority over others at work. But the middle class is only a little more than half the size of the working class. Instead of seeing them as people with middling income, we will see them as people with middling authority. The middle class is caught between the working class and the capitalist class.

We can understand the economic, political, and cultural role of each class if we see it in terms of its relationships to the others, in the textures of social power, rather than simply as income category or lifestyle. This way—with power laid bare—the abstractions of class come to life.

Class is one of America's best-kept secrets. Any serious discussion has been banished from polite company. But classes exist anyway, and the force of events is bringing class back into focus. We will be looking at the circumstances that have hidden an awareness of class, and at those that are now giving new urgency to recognizing class once again. More and more, reality is poking through the myths and revealing the shape of class power. We will see how class is involved in the issues that have dominated economic and political life in the United States over the last forty years. For each, we will see that the issues have played out in a way that has strengthened the power of the capitalist class, degraded the life of the working class, and caught the middle class in the middle.

We will see that the dramatic increase in inequality is not just a case of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, as the media often portray it. Our society's growing inequality of income and wealth is a reflection of the increased *power* of capitalists and the reduced *power* of workers. This basic change in circumstances forms the backdrop for much of the political debate of recent decades.

Class has its foundation in power relations at work, but it is more than that. Class also operates in the larger society: relative power on the economic side of things translates, not perfectly but to a considerable extent, into cultural and political power. These forms of power in turn reinforce, adjust, and help give meaning to classes. Our discussion of class will go beyond production, to search out its implications in the broader society as well.

Over the last four decades the working class has experienced lower real incomes, longer hours at work, fewer protections by unions or government regulations, and inferior schools. Politicians have responded by presenting targets for the anger and frustration of working people and much of the middle class. We have been told that poor people are the reason for hard times, ripping us off and draining us dry through welfare. We have been told that immigrants and workers in other countries are willing to work cheap to take our jobs away. We hear that taxes are the cause of our predicament, that teachers, firefighters, police, and other public sector workers are greedily gobbling up our resources, and even that government itself is the problem, not the solution. And on top of these policy angles, we have been preached a tale of moral decay, in which our problems stem from the decline of "family values." These targets have determined the main direction of public policy in recent decades. As we look at each in turn from the standpoint of class, we will see how each has intensified the attack on working people and strengthened the hand of the capitalist class. Far from solving the problems working people face, these policies have made working people worse off, and—by confusing the issues—helped to alienate the broad electorate from the political process.

The sooner we realize that classes exist and understand the power relations that are driving the economic and political changes swirling around us, the sooner we will be able to build a new politics that engages people by wrestling with reality. The potential power of an openly working

class politics is one of the most exciting and difficult issues of the twenty-first century.

This book concludes with a discussion of the potential for working class power. We will consider the moral foundations of working class politics, which are in sharp contrast with the so-called “family values” agenda that has substituted lifestyle for economic justice as the subject matter of ethical debate. We will see how the raw individualism of the capitalist marketplace calls for a response based on very different values, values that are central to a working class politics: recognition of mutual responsibility, fairness, human dignity, and democracy, in place of self-interest run wild into greed. We will look at new attempts to develop working class power based on these values, in the union movement and in connection with other social movements.

Serious discussions of class are always controversial. Talk of the working class and the capitalists brings to mind the old days of factory life and Karl Marx. In this “postindustrial” service economy, steeped in mass consumerism, many people believe that the working class is surely a thing of the past and Marx irrelevant. In chapter 1 I will explain why class continues to be relevant even when some workers carry briefcases instead of lunchboxes. As for Karl Marx, anyone in the last 150 years who has thought seriously about class owes this pioneer of class analysis an enormous debt. Even the *Wall Street Journal* acknowledged his positive significance as one of “history’s great thinkers” when it featured Marx in the first of a series of articles on “Thinkers Who Shaped the Century.”¹

My purpose, however, is not to discuss the pros and cons of Marx’s analysis, but rather to examine America’s experience in recent decades. My belief in the importance of class analysis rests on its power to make sense of the world, this world, now. An understanding of class can help us interpret what is happening in society, and what we might do to make things better for the great majority of people. I try to make the case to readers who may be skeptical, but who will approach the question with the world as their testing ground.

This book is an attempt to help reopen the discussion of class in America. In such a discussion, we will need to hear the voices of a great many people who do not often speak in public: working class people. I hope this book will stimulate a wide debate among workers, and also among academics, professional people, and all who are concerned about justice. I hope they will bring the experiences of different classes to bear, teach one another, and clarify the questions. The understanding of class that comes from this discussion can help us get to the bottom of what is ailing us and build the social movements needed to make life better for working people. Because class is a question of power, understanding class can add to the power of working people.

The working class began to experience a decline in its quality of life in the early 1970s. At that time, a book appeared with the same title as this book, *The Working Class Majority*.² In it, author Andrew Levison made a strong case for the existence of the working class and its political importance. But the book appeared at a time when interest in the working class was fading among traditional liberal allies. The working class was rapidly disappearing from public view. Unfortunately, Levison’s book has long been out of print.

I hope that in this book, the one you are reading, the theme can be renewed in a social climate that will be more open to it. This book and Levison’s have different structures and scopes, but the underlying points remain the same: the working class is the majority in the United States, and it is long past time that we all recognize that fact, explore its implications, and act accordingly.



1

Chapter 1: THE CLASS STRUCTURE OF THE UNITED STATES

What Are Classes?

I first learned about class growing up in Detroit and its suburbs. Long before I knew what classes were, I experienced them. Before I had the words and concepts, I saw for myself profound differences in different parts of town.

I went to grade school and junior high in Detroit with the children of autoworkers. For high school, my classmates were children of top auto executives in suburban Bloomfield Hills. My parents had found a house in one of the first subdivisions in the area, a corner of one of the finest public school districts in Michigan, where huge estates stood in sharp contrast to the housing I had known before. Other differences soon emerged. The auto plants closed on the first day of deer hunting season so thousands of workers could head into the woods of northern Michigan, but fathers in Bloomfield Hills took their kids hunting for moose in northern Canada or on safari to Africa. A high school boy I knew in Detroit who killed an old woman was put away, but a small group of my new classmates who beat a truck driver to death by the side of the road on a lark

received barely two weeks' social probation at school. Whether we are aware of it or not, even when we don't have the words to explain it, the American experience is an experience of intense class difference.

A population as large and diverse as ours contains many divides. In recent decades, we have arrived at better understandings of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, helping us to make progress toward overcoming discrimination. But as public awareness of these issues has developed, knowledge of class differences has all but disappeared.

It wasn't always so. At the end of the nineteenth and far into the twentieth century, newspapers were filled with stories of pitched class struggle. General strikes. The army called out to put down rebellious workers. Mass picketing and factory occupations in the course of union organizing drives. In cartoons, fat capitalist plutocrats with cigars in their mouths and dollar signs for eyes were denounced as enemies of ordinary people.

More recently, the general view has been that class, if it ever was important, is a thing of the past. No one argues that capitalism is a thing of the past, of course. Instead, we often hear that the relative decline of manufacturing and the tremendous growth of service industries have changed the basic facts of life in capitalist society. The relative decline of blue-collar factory employment and the rise of white-collar service jobs is supposed to show that the working class is history. The fact that we no longer see pitched battles between masses of workers and squads of armed goons hired by a company to kill union organizers is taken as proof that class struggle is over, that we've outgrown that sordid past. In short, the conventional wisdom is that postindustrial society is not industrial society.

True. But also not true. Life in the United States today is dramatically different from life thirty or sixty or a hundred years ago; many of the changes do correspond with changes in the economy. Yet much remains the same. A call-center worker today can tell you stories of speed-up and harassment by supervisors that equal anything reported by her grandfather who worked on the auto assembly line. And both are just as adamant about union representation. A temp services bookkeeper today is as subject to the whims of his employer as was the garment worker at the turn of the twentieth century. The political power of the economic elite today is at least as great as it was in the 1920s, and perhaps even greater since it is less effectively challenged by other class interests. And while service jobs have certainly grown as a share of the labor force, nearly two million more people were working to produce non-agricultural goods (in mining, manufacturing, and construction) in 1998 than in 1970, over twenty-five million people.¹ By 2007, before the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, goods-producing employment had fallen to just over twenty-two million people, but was still 16 percent of total employment in the United States.²

Despite all the changes in the economy, it remains as true today as it was forty and eighty years ago that the majority of Americans are working class people. To see this clearly, we first need to understand what classes make up modern capitalist society. The way to do that is to assess power.

Class is about the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result. This way of approaching class is different from looking at income or status or lifestyle. When Americans do talk about class, these are the measures that usually come up, and for good reason. The working class does have different income, status, and lifestyles from those of the middle class and capitalist class. But if we leave the matter there, we miss the basic reason that classes exist in the first place.

Classes are groups of people connected to one another, and made different from one another, by the ways they interact when producing goods and services. This production process is based in the workplace, but extends into the political and cultural dynamics of society as well, where the rules and expectations that guide the economy are laid down, largely in accord with the needs of the economically powerful. Class is not a box that we fit into, or not, depending on our personal attributes. Classes are not isolated and self-contained. What class we are in depends upon the role we play, as it relates to what others do, in the complicated process in which goods and services are made. These roles carry with them different degrees of income and status, but their most fundamental feature is the different degrees of power each has. The heart of class is not about

lifestyle. It is about economics.

Clearly it makes a difference whether you own the factory or are a hired hand. It makes a difference whether you are the CEO at the bank or the technician who repairs the ATMs. The chief difference is a difference of power: power to determine and control the processes that go on in the factory and the bank, and beyond that, power in the larger society, especially political power.

Power is complicated; it has many sources and is exercised in many ways. Some people have the power to determine which goods and services will be made, how, and by whom. Some set government policy and use the government to control others, through the police, through regulations, through the military. Others have cultural power to shape the ideas and values that tend to dominate our thinking. Elections involve still another type of power.

A person with power in one of these parts of life doesn't necessarily have power in another. But power isn't random. We can find patterns in the exercise of power, spillover from one area of society to another. Economic power and political power are related and reinforce one another. The power to affect our culture comes from control over economic and political resources, but influencing the culture tends to strengthen one's economic and political power as well.

Some power is obvious and some is invisible. The power that we can see we tend to identify with individuals. My supervisor has power. The president of the United States has power. A media critic for the *New York Times* and a program officer at the National Endowment for the Arts have power. I have power, and you do too, in the aspects of our lives that we can control or influence. Most of us are acutely aware of power in its visible, individual forms.

But other kinds of power are easy to miss. The power of inertia tends to perpetuate existing ways of doing things and existing relationships. We aren't necessarily aware, day to day, of the power that limits alternatives, the power of a kind of social automatic pilot, invisible as long as everyone goes along with the program. Invisible force fields of power are built into the structures that hold society together, giving it shape, setting the paths for our opportunity, and setting the limits as well. We tend to take these contours for granted, internalize them, and think of them as the natural order. But when some group of people seriously challenges this kind of power, in politics, in the culture, in assertions of new ways to organize the economy, what had been invisible roars into full view: the "powers that be" step out to demolish the threat.

Classes arise in these relationships of social power, visible and invisible. Class is first and foremost a product of power asserted in the production process. This means power over what goes on at work: who will do which tasks at what pace for what pay, and the power to decide what to produce, how to produce it, and where to sell it. But beyond that, production power involves setting the rules for how markets work and the laws governing property rights. Production power includes organizing an educational system that will generate a workforce with the skills and work habits required to keep production going. Production power extends into many aspects of our lives beyond the job.

We will see shortly that the majority of the population in the United States belongs to the working class. The working class does not exist in isolation, of course; it draws its existence from its relationship to other classes, other people also engaged in making and distributing goods and services. First and foremost among these other classes is the capitalist class, those who own and operate the major corporations. What is important about capitalists is not simply that they have the power to dispose of all that is made in their factories and offices. They have the power to control the work lives of their employees, most of whom are working class people. Their economic power finds its way into enormous influence in politics as well.

In a capitalist society, the "powers that be" are largely the capitalists, the corporate elite at the top of relatively large U.S. businesses. For the most part, capitalists set the terms of production, in all the senses just described, and more. They own or control the businesses so of course they have the power to make the rules. Owning or controlling the businesses, they have the money and social status and, with these, power to influence the political and cultural life of the country. Their influence tends to define everyone's opportunities and limits according to what will be good for capitalists, what will continue, broaden, and deepen their power. Sometimes this power is visible;

when it is not, it just is, baked in the cake.

When I talk about the working class, on the other hand, I am talking about people who share a common situation in these social structures, one without much power. To be in the working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability—on the job, in the market, in politics and culture.

On the job, most workers have little control over the pace and content of their work. They show up, a supervisor shows them the job, and they do it. The job may be skilled or unskilled, white-collar or blue-collar, in any one of thousands of occupations. Whatever the particulars, most jobs share a basic powerlessness in relation to the authority of the owner and the owner's representatives who are there to supervise and control the workforce.

Even when workers do have some influence at work, the basic power relations are unchanged because the capitalist retains the ultimate authority. At the Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee, General Motors and the United Auto Workers established a labor-management cooperation process that many observers have taken as a new kind of worker power. Before the first car was built in 1990, teams of workers and supervisors together designed the factory and the labor relations system. Workers helped make hiring decisions and were part of the product design teams. A union officer sat on the Saturn policy committee.

None of this, however, made the workers anything other than workers. They did not become capitalist executives. Whatever power they had came from two sources: 1) the power of their union to negotiate a contract that gave the workers power under the rules of cooperation, and 2) the agreement of the company, the boss, to allow the workers these powers.

In fact, tensions existed at Saturn between General Motors and the workforce, despite the forms of cooperation. In June 1998, when workers in Flint, Michigan, struck GM parts plants to limit outsourcing, the workers at Saturn almost joined in, because the same issues were at play there, despite cooperation.³ The immediate problem was only one of many in a years-long pattern of conflicts of interest between the company and those who worked the line. Work teams and a respectful supervisor could offer some relief from the typical burdens of capitalist work rules (or teams could create a whole new set of problems). But these improvements hardly make workers into nonworkers. Nor did cooperation save the workers' jobs at the plant when General Motors top management decided to discontinue the Saturn brand and close the plant altogether in 2009, with an announcement that made no mention of their partner union nor production workers.⁴

The same conflicts continue even in companies where workers have employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs). In the first decade of the new century, about 11,500 businesses in the United States, with ten million employees, had ESOPs.⁵ Stocks in such plans typically have various voting restrictions that make it impossible for workers to exercise control of the company. Instead, the plans are usually a form of pension program or sometimes a profit-sharing plan imposed in connection with wage concessions forced upon the workers.⁶

The employees at United Airlines, for example, were part owners of the company through an ESOP imposed when the company was in trouble in 1994. But that didn't turn the workers into capitalists, or even make them any less working class in the power they exerted. As evidence, in July 1998, nineteen thousand reservation takers, gate agents, and ticket sellers voted to join a union, the International Association of Machinists, when the company they "owned" continued to treat them as the workers they in fact continued to be.⁷ When the company finally entered bankruptcy in 2002, the ESOP ended and workers gained no benefit in the reorganization from the ESOP's existence.

Occasionally workers really do own, operate, and control the company where they work. These worker cooperatives can offer some relief from the arrogance of power often found among managers in regular businesses. But worker cooperatives are typically small and have little market power. Workers in these co-ops exercise none of the broader social power that the middle and capitalist classes have. Overall they find themselves in the same social position as other workers.

Workers don't need to hold stock in the company they work for to have an interest in its economic health. Their jobs, pay, and working conditions are wrapped up with the health of the company. But just because workers want their employers to stay in business doesn't make the

workers capitalists. After all, employers want workers to have affordable housing so the company won't have to pay high wages to support high rents. But we don't conclude from this shared interest that employers are workers.

Capitalists and workers are not the only classes in America. There is also a middle class, made up of professional people, supervisors and managers, and small business owners. We will see that it makes sense to put some people who are technically capitalists, those who own small businesses, into the middle class rather than the capitalist class, because of the very real differences in power that separate large and small business.

Throughout this book, we will look at many ways in which class power affects the lives of all people differently according to the class they are in. And we will see that although the working class is at an enormous disadvantage in the United States, it is not powerless.

To understand class, we need to measure it. This is hard to do, because class is not a simple category. But we can get close to the structure of classes by looking at the structure of occupations. The jobs we do give us a strong indication of the place we occupy, on the job and off, in the class structure. So before we examine the ways class works in the larger society, we will look at the work people do for a living.

Although I have measured class by looking at the labor force, people not in the labor force are also in classes. Nonworking spouses typically share the class position of their working mate. Children share the class position of their parents, and retired people typically retain the class standing they had in their working life. The relative sizes of different classes in the labor force closely reflect the class composition of society as a whole.

Before looking at the working class, let's look at the capitalists, the class with whom workers are most directly engaged.

The Capitalist Class

Capitalists and their top managers own and control businesses of all sizes. In a strict sense, *anyone* who makes a living by owning a business is a capitalist, even if she employs only a couple of people, or even if he is self-employed and has no one working for him. But it makes sense to distinguish between big and small capitalists, to recognize the difference in power they have over their workers, in the market, and in the political arena. Bill Gates and Donald Trump don't belong in the same class as the guy who has a small plumbing business and employs an occasional helper when work is steady. In 2006 (the latest year for which these data are available), twenty-six million businesses existed in the United States. Most were small, even tiny. Almost twenty-one million, 81 percent, involved the proprietor alone with no employees. Of the 4.9 million firms with employees in 2005, more than half employed just one to four people, accounting in total for just 5.2 percent of all employment that year. By contrast, just twenty-one thousand companies employed five hundred or more people each. These, 0.4 percent of all businesses in the country, employed 44 percent of all people working that year.⁸ The Internal Revenue Service reports that in 2006, the latest data available, 58 percent of businesses had less than \$25,000 in gross receipts, and all these very small businesses put together, 17.8 million of them, took in just 0.4 percent of all business revenue.⁹

The overwhelming majority of these small businesses are sole proprietorships, which the business owner does not incorporate. Any business profits are mixed in with the owner's other income and reported on his or her federal income tax form using Schedule C. Millions of these self-employed "small businesspeople" have working class jobs as their main source of support; their business activity is just another source of personal income, often much smaller than their job income. Sometimes a working class person will be forced to connect to an employer as an independent contractor, as when a hairdresser rents a chair in a salon whose owner has complete control over work hours and pay. For tax purposes, the "independent" hairdresser is a small business owner, but the reality is quite different.

On the other end of the scale are the incorporated businesses, or corporations. Even most of these are on the small side. Of the nearly 5.4 million corporations operating in 2006, only 19

percent, 1.1 million companies, had gross receipts above a million dollars. But the receipts going to this 19 percent added up to 96 percent of all corporate receipts that year.¹⁰

Clearly it is appropriate to make distinctions among capitalists, separating big business from small entrepreneurs. No clear, bright line separates the small business of the middle class entrepreneur and the big business of the capitalist class. A company employing fifteen people might be big in a town of five hundred residents; its owner might have a respected role in the local community and its political and social life. But in a larger city, such a business would disappear in the scheme of things, from the point of view of those who hold serious power. So there is no simple rule to differentiate big from small business. Any attempt has to take into account the overall social setting of the business. Still, the distinction is worth pursuing to get a clearer picture of the diverse interests of the “business community.”

To begin, I call any business “small” if its owner works side by side with the employees and supervises them directly. This owner is in the middle class. The business becomes “big” and the owner a member of the capitalist class only when the owner no longer works directly with the workers, exercises control over the workforce through at least one layer of middle management, and becomes occupied full-time with running the business as a senior strategist and source of authority, largely removed from the production process itself. Again, there is no hard-and-fast rule to separate these types of businesses, but experience suggests that twenty employees is a reasonable cutoff, beyond which a small business becomes big.

By this measure, there were 639,000 big businesses in the United States in 2005, each employing twenty or more people. These were only 13 percent of all businesses that had any employees beyond the owner, but in 2006 they had 81 percent of all employees and accounted for 85 percent of the country’s nongovernment payroll.¹¹ The boards of directors, principal owners, and top executives of these companies form the capitalist class. They are no more than 2 percent of the labor force. Most of these businesses are big fish in small ponds, holding sway in a local area but wielding little market or political power on a national or even regional scale.

To get a handle on the scope of big business and the capitalist class on a national scale, we can learn from how the business community itself approaches the question. One way is to look at the Small Business Administration, a part of the U.S. Department of Commerce that provides technical and financial assistance to small businesses. According to the rules of the SBA, established by Congress, any business with fewer than five hundred employees is a small business. This number indicates that the government views “big business” as a relatively tiny number of corporations. In 2005, by the standards of the SBA, there were only twenty-one thousand big businesses in the United States, 0.4 percent of all businesses with any employees, and 0.08 percent of all businesses in the country. Yet they employed over 44 percent of all business employees.¹² In 2006, this tiny percent of all businesses in the United States paid out 56 percent of the country’s private payroll (not counting sole proprietorships).¹³

We can reasonably consider these twenty-one thousand big businesses to be the national economic elite. Their directors and senior officers exercise considerable power, not only within the companies they control but also in the larger society, which is affected by their decisions and opinions on strategies for investment, collective bargaining, and foreign affairs.

Even within this elite, power is concentrated in the very largest financial, manufacturing, service, and transportation companies. At the end of June 2010, there were 7,830 banks in the United States (not counting the separate branches many banks have): 6,676 commercial banks and 1,154 savings banks (not counting credit unions).¹⁴ Banks are typically ranked in size by the amount of assets each controls. Thousands of banks are small businesses in small towns, important there but nowhere else. But the twenty-five largest commercial banks had assets ranging from \$66.6 billion (Northern Trust) to \$1.6 trillion (JPMorgan Chase). They were only 0.4 percent of all commercial banks, but this tiny fraction controlled 68 percent of all commercial bank assets in the country, \$8.17 trillion. Even among these very richest and most powerful institutions, power is concentrated in the uppermost tier: the five biggest banks controlled 56 percent of the assets of the top twenty-five.¹⁵

Similar concentrations occur in farming. When we think of agriculture, most of us think of the family farm, the backbone of rural America. In 2007, of the 2.2 million farms operating in the United States, 28 percent were under fifty acres, but they accounted for just 1.8 percent of all farmland. By contrast, fewer than 4 percent of farms were larger than two thousand acres, but they covered 54 percent of the farmland in the United States.¹⁶ In 2007, almost 60 percent of farms in the country sold crops worth less than \$10,000 for the entire year, taking in a total of less than 1 percent of all farm sales. The biggest operations, with 2007 sales of a million dollars or more, were fewer than 3 percent of all farms, but they took in almost 60 percent of all farm revenue.¹⁷

These lopsided holdings are more than matched in manufacturing. In 2006, 286,000 firms were engaged in manufacturing in the United States. Almost three-quarters of these firms were small businesses employing fewer than twenty people; together they employed just under 9 percent of the manufacturing work force. At the other end of the scale, there were four thousand manufacturing companies that each employed more than five hundred workers. These big businesses were just 1.3 percent of the total, but they employed 55 percent of the manufacturing workforce.¹⁸ Ninety-four percent of manufacturing corporations had under \$10 million in assets in 2006, and together they took in only 7 percent of all corporate manufacturing revenue. But the 1,760 largest manufacturing corporations had assets in excess of \$250 million apiece. They were only 0.6 percent of all manufacturing corporations, but they took in 81 percent of all manufacturing corporations' revenues, and 91 percent of the profit.¹⁹

These concentrations of power dominate industries we encounter in everyday life. The top three soft-drink makers, Coke, Pepsi, and Dr. Pepper/Seven Up, have nearly 90 percent of their market.²⁰ At the close of the last century, the top five music album producers had 84 percent of their market. Ninety percent of the cigarettes sold in this country were made by three companies, while four companies dominated residential telephone service, and so on.²¹

Over time, corporate assets have become increasingly concentrated, a trend that continues. In banking, for example, while the number of commercial banks dropped from 12,500 at the end of 1990 to 7,100 in 2009, the share of bank assets controlled by the hundred largest banks increased from 50 percent to 82 percent. The share controlled by the ten biggest banks in the country almost tripled, going from 20 to 54 percent.²² Concentration of banking assets among the largest banks increased still more after the 2008 financial crisis despite concerns that banks had already become "too big to fail" and threatened the stability of the entire economy.

Given the stark pattern of concentration of business assets in the relatively few largest corporations, it makes sense to consider big business as a distinct force in the economy, and to consider the people who run these big businesses as a distinct class with more economic and political power than others. The average board of directors of a big business operating on a national scale includes about fifteen people.²³ There are, then, a total of about 315,000 positions on the boards of directors of the twenty-one thousand national-scale big businesses in the United States. These are the senior corporate officers and the outside directors who represent major suppliers, customers, sources of credit, and other links to the rest of the corporate world.

Most directors sit only on one company's board, but some sit on the boards of two or five or even more corporations at the same time, forming intricate patterns of interlocking directorships among the major corporations. One detailed study of the directors of the eight hundred largest corporations in the United States found that 15 percent of directors sat on more than one company's board.²⁴ Taking these multiple director positions into account, we can identify 245,000 or so individuals who together constitute the governing boards of national-scale corporations. They are the "captains of industry" who dominate the U.S. economy, the two-tenths of 1 percent of the private sector workforce who are the core of the capitalist class on a national scale.

The Ruling Class

From among these directors, the few tens of thousands who sit on two or more boards form a pattern of interlocking directorships among the major banks and nonfinancial corporations. This

network, together with the top-level political and cultural leaders aligned with it, can fairly be called the ruling class.²⁵

Classes are not simply the sum of many individuals who share certain characteristics or positions of relative economic power. The ruling class is bound together into a coherent social force by common networks and institutions that allow the ruling class to rule—to give strategic guidance to society. Think tanks, elite university research and policy centers, exclusive social and political organizations, media and cultural institutions, and the philanthropic foundations and wealthy individuals who finance these institutions, all interact to create an environment in which debates lead to policy formulation and political processes that broadly reflect the corporate interests at the center of the network.

Its members have substantial power but, like all classes, the ruling class is not a monolithic unit and it is not all-powerful. Both within the United States and internationally, its members have factional disputes among themselves, regional differences, and differences based on the interests of specific industries. The ruling class is limited by competition among corporations and by the organized power of other classes, but its members have enough similarity and coherence of interest and outlook to differentiate them from the rest of society. We can identify the ruling class as a small elite among the capitalists and their top allies in politics and culture. The entire U.S. ruling class could easily be seated in Yankee Stadium, which holds fifty-two thousand people.

How Classes Persist

Economic relationships are the foundation of classes. But class is not just an economic matter. While economic relationships may remain more or less stable over generations, the individuals who make up the different classes come and go, and must be continuously produced anew in every generation.

This means that classes are not just the sum of the people in them at a given time. Classes are produced whole over time, in a complicated set of processes involving almost all aspects of society: cultural representations and norms, so important in shaping our understandings of who we are and how we are related to others; education; religion; politics; academic research; and so on.²⁶

Classes should be understood in part, then, as dynamic processes by which they reproduce over time. The capitalist class, for example, has created institutions vital to its reproduction as a class and the stability of its ruling class, including elite educational institutions, social clubs, and business, trade, and lobbying groups. Over time, these institutions shape young people and equip them with the knowledge, skills, and social networks essential for the continued existence of the capitalist class as a more-or-less coherent social force capable of giving strategic direction to business and the country as a whole. As blacks and women have entered into the capitalist and ruling classes, they have been absorbed into these networks, but with residual racist and sexist barriers. In response, they have developed their own institutions to acclimate and guide people into the higher reaches of economic, political, and cultural power.²⁷

The working class is also reproduced across generations through the institutions and media representations that working people encounter, some of their own making, most not. The working class, like the capitalist and ruling classes, is not just a collection of individuals. It is a coherent social force, principally trained and brought together by educational and cultural institutions and their employers to produce goods and services. But, unlike the capitalist and ruling classes, the working class has no institutions designed to forge it into a social force ready to give strategic guidance to society.

The Middle Class

Understanding the structure and size of the capitalist class helps us to understand the middle class. The middle class is under constant discussion in American political life. As the working class has disappeared from polite conversation, the middle class has come to be accepted as the social

position most Americans are in. Politicians appeal to the middle class. Tax cuts are designed for the middle class. Downsizing afflicts the middle class. Even union leaders almost always refer to their members as middle class.

Most people think of the middle class in terms of income and lifestyle. In short, the middle class has a middling income. Its members are not the rich, who are a fringe group of celebrities and business millionaires, nor are they the poor, the fringe at the bottom of society who are chronically unemployed, on welfare, outside the mainstream, the “underclass.” The middle class are those people who, in Bill Clinton’s phrase, “work hard and play by the rules,” going to work every day just to get by. The common man, everywoman.

Just where to draw the line between the poor, the middle class, and the rich is arbitrary in this way of thinking. The middle class itself often gets divided into an “upper middle class,” a “lower middle,” and even a “middle middle.” Rather than get sidetracked by the many possible income dividing lines that are used, we will get a better understanding of classes if we define them in a very different way.

Let’s ask: What is the middle class in the middle of? If we answer this question in terms of power instead of income, we see that the middle class is in between the two great social forces in modern society, the working class and the capitalist class. These two classes are connected at work, in the production of goods and services. But they have sharply opposing interests, in production and in politics. The middle class is caught in the middle of these conflicting roles and interests. In the context of the sharp conflicts that arise between labor and capital, the middle class is caught in the crossfire. A look at the lives of small business owners, supervisors, and professional people will help make the point clear.

Small Business Owners

First, let’s return to small business owners. They are caught between big businesses on the one hand, which impose intense restrictions on their ability to compete, grow, and make money, and workers on the other, who press for wages, working conditions, and social policies that are often beyond the capacity of a small business to finance.

As is typical of the middle class in general, small business owners share common ground with big business in the defense of property interests and hostility to organized labor, but they also have common ground with workers in their desire to find relief from the discipline of the marketplace dominated by big business. Small entrepreneurs are not in the working class, even though they work hard and many have themselves been in the working class in the past, especially in the building trades. Entrepreneurs have more independence than workers—that’s the whole point of being your own boss. And to their workers they are the boss.

One example of the complexity of relations among working, capitalist, and middle classes comes from the world of the family farm. Back in the 1970s, small farms in southern Michigan and northern Ohio were growing tomatoes destined for sale to the Campbell Soup Corporation. These farmers employed farm laborers, mostly Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The farmworkers, under the leadership of Baldemar Velazquez and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), began to organize themselves into a union and sought higher wages and better working conditions in the fields, demanding, for example, access to clean drinking water and toilet facilities.

The small farmers said they couldn’t afford the workers’ demands, and pointed to the terms of the contracts they had signed with Campbell that set low prices for the produce. The workers’ demands threatened them with ruin, they said. The workers were unmoved.

But after the impasse continued, FLOC changed its approach. Instead of going toe to toe with the small farmers who employed them, the farmworkers went to Campbell and demanded a better deal for the small farmers. FLOC went to the farmers, too, and ultimately won them over to go together to challenge Campbell, and to share with the workers the better terms that, working together, they were able to extract from Campbell, the big business that had been limiting them all. In 1985, after a long and bitter fight, Campbell finally was forced to improve the terms of their

purchases from the small farmers, who in turn improved the wages and working conditions of the farmworkers.

It was no love fest on the part of the farmers in Ohio. Many had hated the union and its organizers for years. It was only after they began bargaining contracts and found out that they did in fact have more in common with the workers than the corporate processors that they warmed up to FLOC. As one FLOC staff member put it in 1999, "This isn't true of them all, but these days some of our biggest boosters are those same farmers who used to run Baldemar off their farms." These small farmers' interests were best served by siding with their own workers, developing a common strategy against a common enemy, and making concessions and accommodations to the workers along the way.

Not every small business is caught so directly and obviously between labor and big business. But in the larger play of forces in society, that's where they are. Many small businesses share with working people a common vulnerability to market forces dominated by large corporations. Small business owners have no health insurance except what they provide for themselves, as is true for millions of workers. Small businesses and workers alike have difficulty getting credit, and both groups are vulnerable to the disruption caused when a big corporation decides to move out of a community.

Of course, small business owners part company with workers in at least as many ways. Workers' wages are business costs, as are the costs of complying with health, safety, and environmental standards often championed by workers. On these questions, and in the general defense of private property interests, the middle class of small business owners is drawn to the side of big business. But it can also happen that big business will promote certain government regulations knowing that they alone can afford to abide by them, using regulation on purpose to put smaller competitors at a disadvantage.

In short, small business owners are caught in the middle. They share with working people a common vulnerability to market forces dominated by large corporations, but they share with those same big businesses an interest in keeping the power of working people to a minimum.

Supervisors and Managers

Supervisors and middle managers make up another large part of the middle class. Think about a foreman or supervisor. This person is the company's front line of management, there to make sure the work gets done, responsible for pushing the workforce to perform. Foremen and supervisors are often promoted from the ranks of the workers themselves, often have a detailed knowledge of the work, and sometimes even continue to work alongside those they are supervising. But they are an extension of management, although at the lowest level, with layers of management above pushing them to perform, just as they push the workforce below.

The foreman has a notoriously nasty job. He or she takes grief both from the workers being supervised and also from those in higher management who are suspicious of any laxness in the performance of managerial duties. This is what supervisors at all levels are in the middle of. This distinction has long been recognized in labor law, which usually requires supervisors to be in a different bargaining unit from nonsupervisory employees, and in the way the Department of Labor reports wages and other information separately for "supervisory" and "nonsupervisory" employees.

Of course, class position is based on the reality of the work situation, not the job title. I had a student who was an "assistant manager" at a shoe store in a local mall. All this meant was that she had a key to open the store in the morning (so the boss didn't have to come in early), and she had the authority to count the money. These extra duties brought her a slightly higher wage than her coworkers, but she didn't manage anything. She was in the working class despite her managerial title.

Some workers do take on what may seem like supervisory duties. "Lead workers," for example, give direction to coworkers with less experience or skill and often get premium pay for their abilities. These more senior workers are not middle class managers, however. They don't

discipline fellow workers or act in other ways as direct representatives of management authority, duties that are central parts of any supervisor's work life.

Over time, court rulings have reduced the legal definition of who is an employee with rights to union organization and membership protected by law. In private universities and colleges, for example, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Yeshiva* decision in 1980 that faculty should be considered on a par with upper management because they participate in hiring and firing decisions, even if only by advising upper management in peer-review tenure deliberations.²⁸ Ever since, lacking the protection of law, it has been almost impossible for faculty in private colleges and universities to organize into unions except in rare instances when the college president voluntarily accepts a union for the faculty. Faculty at public colleges and universities, on the other hand, are covered by state laws that sometimes allow faculty unions (and sometimes prohibit them), unlike federal laws, which cover only private sector employees. Public university and college faculty have organized themselves into unions for collective bargaining in many states.

Professionals

A third section of the middle class is made up of the millions of professional people such as doctors, lawyers, college professors, and accountants. These people tend to have considerable authority and flexibility in their jobs, whether they are self-employed or work in a corporate department. They often put in long hours, and they do their work in accordance with rules that guide their actions. But on the whole they function within professional associations that exert considerable influence in setting the rules and standards to which the members of the profession are subject. In this way, the discipline professionals face is not the same as that experienced by workers.

Young professionals just starting their careers can be subject to intense supervision and long hours and have no control over their work. Medical residents or first-year associates in a law firm may experience these conditions. At universities, young adjuncts face conditions much closer to those of the skilled working class than to those of tenured professors. But worker-like conditions do not put young professionals into the working class. Rather, the conditions are part of an apprenticeship or even hazing. The hope and expectation are that full professional status will come. One's sense of class, and the reality of class, is therefore not just a question of one's current work setting. It is related to the trajectory of future prospects connected to the current work.

If a medical resident were told that she would have to live that harried life for the next forty years, she would think differently about her situation and her supervisors and employers. People with new PhD degrees may be willing to put up with temporary employment for a year or two before settling into a tenure track job with an academic future. But in recent years, as it has become apparent that tens of thousands of adjuncts will *never* find a regular place in the professional life of the university, their attitudes as adjuncts have been changing. Their militancy and interest in union protections have increased, and their feelings of estrangement from the regular professorate have grown as well.

As corporate management practices penetrate deeper into professional life, professionals are increasingly finding themselves in the middle of social forces they have little experience with. I have identified classes according to the degrees of power and authority people have at work. But power relationships are not fixed over time. They can change, and as they change, people's class position can change, too. We saw evidence of this especially among middle class professional and managerial people caught in the changing structures of work that began in the 1990s and have continued into the 2010s.

There can be no better example of the traditional middle class professional than the family doctor. Traditionally a person of authority and independence, the doctor at work is clearly removed from the work life of the secretary or mill hand. The doctor's class standing is not directly a result of the years of training required. A skilled machinist or auto mechanic can take years to train, too. The doctor is different from the machinist because no one tells the doctor what to do. The doctor is in control of her time and effort as well as the treatment of her patients. That is, until recently.

Now that HMOs have brought cost control, reengineering, and corporate management practices to the medical sector, doctors are increasingly subject to a discipline and control unknown in their ranks in the entire history of the profession. Managed care was supposed to be a way to “bring competition to the health industry.” What this has actually meant is the penetration of big business and capitalist methods into the medical work process, in the doctor’s office as well as the hospital. Under this regime, doctors are increasingly being changed into—many would say, “reduced to”—employees, more like skilled artisans, less like independent agents. In response, some doctors are turning to unions for protection. To some extent they are concerned about their incomes. But in most of these unionization efforts, the real spur driving doctors to unions is the question of power and autonomy in their work life. As doctors have come under these management practices, their political views have changed as well.²⁹

Beginning lawyers now often find themselves in large firms where they work in bullpen conditions on repetitive, routine matters. They are assigned cases and intensely supervised for efficient use of time, and share more in common with skilled workers than with the independent lawyers of the traditional professional middle class.

In recent years, even managers have been subject to the discipline of capitalist labor relations. When the *New York Times* ran a weeklong series called “Downsizing in America” in 1996,³⁰ the stories were of middle managers as well as skilled workers. During the corporate restructuring of the early nineties, millions of workers lost their jobs. But in fact production workers were not losing jobs any faster than in the 1980s. What had changed was the increase in layoffs for managers and supervisors, long cushioned from the discipline of the labor market.³¹

The fervor the media had for this story reminded me of the 1968 garbage strike in New York City. After many days of growing piles of garbage on the sidewalks, a TV reporter tried to convey the seriousness of the situation: the rats, he said, had been seen leaving Harlem, crossing over the Triborough Bridge into largely white areas of Queens.

Rats shouldn’t go into Queens. But neither should they have been in Harlem in the first place, and it wasn’t news when they were. It is a serious matter that middle managers and professional people are treated badly, stripped of their dignity at work, and subject to the raw power of capitalist authority. But for working class people, such treatment is no news at all.

The fact that middle class professionals are increasingly exposed to capitalist power does not immediately put them into the working class. This can occur, however, if the basic nature of the work and work relations in a profession changes drastically enough. That is what happened to skilled craftsmen as mass production drew them into capitalist work settings in the last part of the nineteenth century. It was this proletarianization of skilled craft work that led those workers to form the first long-lasting trade unions, the basis of the American Federation of Labor.

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, public school teachers have been the primary example of this process. Fighting for authority, they are caught between pressures from school boards wanting to apply corporate management strategies to control their work, on the one hand, and reluctance among many to identify too closely with unions and the working class, which can be seen as unprofessional. At the same time, teachers face increasingly impatient demands from working class parents that their children get a better education.

The corporate attack on teachers demands that teachers give up “special privileges” that professional people share but working class people lack. High on the list is tenure. With tenure, teachers have greater job security than most workers, even though tenure does not really guarantee a job for life. Teachers can still be fired or laid off for many reasons. The main benefit of tenure is that it protects academic freedom and helps shield the curriculum from outside political interference. Parents might envy tenure, or believe that it keeps lousy teachers on the job. But they share with teachers a common interest in resisting corporate practices in the schools and universities and a common interest in allowing teachers to apply their expertise, in association with parents, to construct professional standards that serve the interests of students. This is a typically complicated condition of middle class existence.

It has always been true that the process by which professional people are brought into the

working class is not smooth. It involves intense conflict. We see that most clearly now in the education reform movement that challenges the legitimacy of teacher unions across the country, claiming that they are the biggest impediment to school reforms that would help children get a better education.³² The imposition of corporate management practices into the schools, central to much of the reform agenda, requires the freedom of principals and school boards to impose their decisions upon the teachers. Management has increasingly subjected teachers to the sorts of discipline and regulation that typify the conditions of skilled workers. As *New York Times* business columnist Joe Nocera approvingly explained the process, New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein “empowered principals, making them, as he puts it, ‘the CEOs of their buildings.’”³³

In response, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, the two major teachers’ unions in the United States, representing over four million people, have insisted that teachers should play a central role in guiding curriculum reforms and other changes in school operations. In doing so, the unions are trying to preserve the professional status of their members, to distinguish the work life of the teacher from the experience of the cafeteria worker or janitor. The idea is to avoid a situation in which the school board, principal, or curriculum consulting firm decides what should be taught in each class and what teaching methods should be used, and then hires teachers only to tell them “here’s the job, now go and do it.” As the school reform movement has come to dominate the public education system, teachers have often been on the losing side of this conflict.

The imposition of detailed control over teachers involves subjecting them to quantitative measures of “output,” using students’ scores on standardized tests of basic skills as indicators of teacher performance in creating “value added” in their work. The corporate model of education requires the teacher to hone the student into the desired market-ready product with appropriate skills, much as the machinist shapes work into a product for sale in the market. A key distinction between a professional and a skilled worker is the degree to which the person has control over the design of the work. When the teacher loses control of the lesson plan and becomes subject to evaluation based on externally determined quantitative measures of output, the teacher leaves the realm of professional life and enters the world of skilled work.

There is no question that this process is well along after ten years of No Child Left Behind, and two years of the Race to the Top as implemented by the Obama administration. As a result, teachers across the country are being transformed from professionals into skilled workers, moving from the middle class into the working class as the dynamics of capitalist development play out in their part of the economy. A natural part of this agenda is weakening or destroying teachers’ unions.

But this process is not uniform across the entire teaching profession. Some schools and teachers are subject to rigorous control, others much less so. As a general rule, for teachers and other professionals, changes in their economic and social circumstances are closely tied to the experience of those whom they serve. Those professionals whose work and lives are most closely linked to working people have tended to do badly as the standard of living and social standing of the working class has declined. Those professionals most closely associated with the capitalist class have tended to do much better. Compare the experience of public defenders with corporate lawyers, or the experience of doctors who practice in HMO clinics in working class towns with that of high-priced doctors who don’t have to hassle with insurance companies because their well-to-do patients can afford to write checks for services rendered. These differences reflect the “middle” position of the professional middle class.

For public school teachers, following this approach suggests that it is reasonable to conclude that by 2010 the school reform movement had gone far enough that about 60 percent of teachers could be counted as skilled workers, roughly in proportion to the size of the working class in the country (see [Table 1](#)). These are teachers in “failing schools” or schools judged in need of strong intervention, typically in working class areas of cities and suburbs. But teachers in other public schools, particularly where the children of middle class professionals and others who are relatively secure economically get an education, have generally escaped these pressures.

Nursing is another profession increasingly subject to the rigors of skilled work without the

independence of professional life. One indication is the prevalence of overtime, even forced overtime, in nursing work. Reviewing 5,317 eight- and twelve-hour nurse shifts, one study found that two-thirds of full-time nurses worked overtime at least ten times in two two-week periods, one-third reported overtime on every shift, and 10 percent of the shifts involved forced overtime.³⁴ The prevalence of overtime for nurses is one of the leading reasons that nurses leave the job. The desire to protect patient care and sustain nursing levels has led sixteen states to impose legislative or regulatory restriction on overtime for nurses.³⁵ In the calculations underlying Table 1, I've counted three-quarters of nurses in 2010 as members of the skilled working class, one-quarter as middle class professionals.

Similar questions arise in higher education, where the erosion of tenure and the increasing employment of contingent academic labor—part-time adjuncts and full-time non-tenure-track lecturers—have dramatically changed the academic workforce. During the rapid expansion of higher education in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, two-thirds of faculty were tenured or on tenure-track lines. A decade into the twenty-first century, the proportions have reversed—only one-third of faculty are in relatively secure positions while 70 percent of undergraduate instruction in public institutions is done by part-time adjuncts, who make up 47 percent of all teaching faculty (not counting graduate students).³⁶

The challenge to professional standing among academics is not only a question of tenure. As modern corporate management practices gain ground in universities, faculty members are increasingly subject to bigger teaching loads, larger classes, and other forms of speedup. Research activity is less and less supported by the university itself; rather, faculty are required to seek outside, often corporate, support for research, casting the professor in the role of part entrepreneur, part subordinate and supplicant to those with the money to control the research agenda. The life of the mind, individual research and scholarship: these professional aspirations are being replaced by expectations that the professor is there to generate a certain number of market-ready students, the “product” of higher education institutions, and to do research that corresponds directly to the needs of business. As university administrators treat faculty more like employees and less like colleagues, as faculty tailor their research more and more to corporate needs, they come to resemble the skilled working class. The characteristics of middle class professional life slip away, with telltale changes in power.

The imposition of corporate management practices at colleges and universities sometimes extends to changing the content and process of teaching itself, by which faculty teach courses they do not design (using curricula and teaching materials developed by other faculty, sometimes at different institutions), and administering standardized tests they do not create and sometimes do not grade. These tasks are sometimes done by others in a process called “unbundling,” in which the variety of tasks a professional faculty member does is split apart and assigned to different people in a new division of labor in higher education.

John Sperling, the founder and then-president of the University of Phoenix, the largest private for-profit institution of higher education in the United States, vividly described this process in an address to a conference of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education in March 2000. Speaking to an audience of professors and university administrators who bargain union contracts, Sperling began his remarks with an extended quote from *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The bourgeoisie [capitalist class] cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life.³⁷ Looking up from the lectern, Sperling said that he didn't usually agree with Karl Marx, but that he did want his audience to understand that capitalism was

coming to higher education, that all that was solid would melt into air, and that all that was holy would be profaned.³⁸

There is no precise measure of the degree to which this process has penetrated colleges and universities. As with all other professionals, those academics most closely connected to working class students—in community colleges and private for-profit colleges—are most subject to these pressures, while academics in university centers are much less affected, although not immune. The transformation of academics from professionals to skilled workers is furthest along in the private for-profit institutions that exercise the greatest control over their instructors. The widespread use of adjuncts in community colleges also carries the academy along this path.

Management employs adjuncts to avoid paying benefits, to escape the requirements of tenure, and to secure classroom instruction at per-course pay far less than regular faculty receive. But low pay and bad working conditions are not the basic markers of class; authority and autonomy are. Many adjuncts retain authority over their work, and college administrators often lack the resources to supervise adjunct instruction as closely as they might prefer. Nearly 40 percent of adjuncts have nonacademic jobs;³⁹ they teach a course or two for personal or professional reasons—business owners teaching accounting, judges teaching law school courses, practicing engineers teaching something of their field at the local community college. While the process of subjecting academic labor to capitalist control, forecast with such relish by John Sperling, has begun, most academics retain sufficient control over their work to remain in the professional middle class, though under ever-increasing pressure. The class standings reported in Table 1 count only 5 percent of academic labor as skilled workers, the rest still in the professional middle class.

Some teachers, social workers, and other professionals whom I place in the middle class already think of themselves as workers and show increasing interest in unions and collective bargaining for protection. Others resist any association with people who are not “professional” and identify more closely with the capitalist class in their values and political leanings. In politics, as in economics, people in the middle class are in the middle, and tend to identify themselves with labor or with capital depending on their particular situation and depending on the relative power of working class movements compared with the power capitalists can demonstrate.

The Working Class

The working class is large and diverse. Pursuing our economic approach to class, we can get a picture of it by looking carefully at the occupational structure of the U.S. economy. But the specific work of a particular job is not the only question to consider. Since class is a matter of relationships and power, not of job title, a person with the same job will be in one or another class depending on the circumstances of the work. A truck driver who owns his own rig, for example, is in the middle class as a small entrepreneur, but a truck driver employed by a freight shipper is in the working class. A plumber operating as an independent contractor counts in the middle class, but the same plumber working for someone else is in the working class.

The U.S. Department of Labor publishes detailed information about the numbers of people employed in hundreds of different occupations.⁴⁰ These occupations are grouped into nine broad categories: management, business, and financial occupations; professional specialty; sales; office and administrative support; services; construction, extraction and maintenance; production; transportation and materials moving; and farming, forestry, and fishing. After examining the detailed occupational content of each job title in each category, I have assigned employees to the working class or to the middle and capitalist class according to the degree of authority and independence the employee typically has on the job. The results are shown in Table 1.

For example, in 2010 15.4 million people were employed in sales occupations. Of these, 8.1 million had working class jobs, including 3.1 million retail cashiers and 3.3 million retail sales workers, as well as telemarketers, rental clerks, and others with similar titles. But stock traders and real estate agents, also counted by the Department of Labor in the broad “sales” category, have enough authority and independence to be counted in the middle class. By going through each

occupation in the sales category in this way, I conclude that of these 15.4 million people, 8.1 million are in the working class, and 7.3 million in the middle class.

The professional specialty category divides the other way: of the 30.8 million people in these jobs, 62 percent are middle class. People counted as professionals hold such jobs as engineers, computer scientists (not computer operators), doctors, lawyers, and the like. These are middle class people, given the degree of independence and authority they typically have at work, and they are a clear majority of this occupational category. But this broad category also includes many working class people. For example, the Department of Labor includes respiratory, speech, and physical therapists among professional specialists, as well as emergency medical technicians, clinical laboratory technicians, teacher assistants, and broadcast sound engineers. Given the specifics of these jobs, I think it is appropriate to count those who do them as highly trained and skilled working class people, even with their professional qualifications, except when they are self-employed. Similarly, the Labor Department counts all nurses as professionals, but the conditions of their work lead me to believe that perhaps three-quarters are working class, while the rest have the authority and independence that characterize middle class jobs. Similarly, as discussed above, 60 percent of K–12 teachers counted by the Department of Labor as professionals, and 5 percent of academics, are best considered skilled workers. Adding them all up reveals that 38 percent of people classified as professionals by the Department of Labor are working class.

TABLE 1 Employment by occupation, 2010 (in thousands)

OCCUPATIONAL GROUP	TOTAL	MIDDLE CLASS	WORKING CLASS	WORKING CLASS (% OF TOTAL)
Management, business, financial operations*	20,938	20,656	282	13.0
Professional and related	30,805	19,025	11,780	38.2
Service (including health support)	24,634	2,213	22,421	91.0
Office and administrative support	18,047	1,507	16,540	91.6
Sales and related	15,386	7,324	8,062	52.4
Construction, extraction, and maintenance	12,086	1,040	11,046	91.4
Production	7,998	702	7,296	91.2
Transportation and material moving	8,182	498	7,684	93.9
Farming, fishing, and forestry	987	44	943	95.5
TOTAL EMPLOYED	139,063	53,009	86,054	61.9
Unemployed**	13,605	2,858	10,747	79.0
TOTAL	152,668	55,867	96,801	63.4

*includes 1,505 CEOs

**only with past employment

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, January 2011, Table 1 (Household data).

The remaining seven occupational categories are fairly homogeneous. The “executive, administrative, and managerial” category includes essentially no working class people (except insurance claims examiners and appraisers). These are such jobs as property managers, financial managers, and educational administrators. At the other extreme, almost all of the office and administrative support personnel are working class: secretaries, information clerks, file clerks and other records-processing occupations, postal clerks and mail carriers, computer equipment operators, and teacher aides, among others. The middle class is found among the supervisors. The same is true of transportation and material moving occupations, production jobs, and construction, extraction, and maintenance. Table 1 shows that service occupations are overwhelmingly working class. These include firefighters, dental assistants and nursing aides, private guards and police officers, hairdressers and cosmetologists, janitors, and waiters. But service occupations also include some middle class positions such as supervisors and restaurant chefs (though not short-order cooks, who are typically working class).

In addition to those working in 2010, the labor force included 13.6 million unemployed people who were actively looking for work but had no job of any kind. Data are available showing the last-held occupation of the unemployed.⁴¹ Not surprisingly, the unemployed tend to be from those occupational groups with a larger concentration of working class jobs. Using Department of Labor data, we find that 79 percent of the unemployed in 2010 came out of working class jobs.

Once each occupational group is analyzed and separated into working class and middle class jobs, it is a simple matter to add up the pieces and find the total class composition of the labor force. In 2010, the labor force numbered 152.7 million people (employed or unemployed but actively looking for work). Of these, 96.8 million were working class; 55.9 million were middle class and above. In other words, in 2010 the working class was 63 percent of the labor force. This is why I say we live in a country with a working class majority.

By the way, the Department of Labor comes up with an even larger number for what might be considered the working class than I do. It notes that 82 percent of the 108 million private sector employees in the United States in 2009 were “nonsupervisory” employees.⁴² This includes such professionals as doctors, accountants, and professors who do not supervise others, whom I count as middle class.

It may seem surprising that so many people are in the working class, given the declining relative size of manufacturing in the U.S. economy. But images of the working class too closely identified with goods-producing blue-collar workers miss the point. Only 14.8 percent of people counted by the Department of Labor as “nonsupervisory employees” in the nonfarm private sector are in goods-producing industries (mining, construction, and manufacturing).⁴³ Over 70 percent of all private sector nonsupervisory employees hold white-collar jobs in wholesale and retail trade, finance, insurance, and real estate, and a wide variety of business, personal, and health-related service industries.⁴⁴ But even in 1950, in the heyday of American manufacturing strength, no more than a third of the nonagricultural workforce was employed in manufacturing.⁴⁵

Old images of the working class need correction in other ways, too. Identifying the working class with factories may foster the notion that “working class” means men, or even just white men. Think again: less than half of those in the working class labor force, about 40 percent, are white men. Minorities have always been an integral part of the working class, a good number of women have always worked in factories, and today women are a slightly higher percentage of the working class workforce than they are of the labor force as a whole. In 2010, women were 47.2 percent of the employed workforce. Sorting through the data by detailed occupational category to look at gender composition, I find that women were 50.1 percent of the working class, and 42.6 percent of the middle class (Table 2).⁴⁶

But this does not mean that women have broken out of traditional job categories in a big way. Women are still grossly underrepresented in the more-skilled blue-collar jobs that traditionally have been held by men. In 2010, women held 27.6 percent of production jobs in the United States, but were only 3.9 percent of machinists and 0.9 percent of tool and die makers. Women were overrepresented in lower-paying jobs such as bakers (57 percent) and sewing machine operators (78.5 percent). In sales, women are disproportionately in low-paying working class occupations such as cashier and retail clerk, and underrepresented in high-paying professional sales positions such as stockbrokers and financial service professionals. Among the professions, women are the majority (57.4 percent), but they are overrepresented among nurses (91 percent), teachers (73.8 percent), and other predominately working class jobs, and underrepresented among engineers (12.9 percent), lawyers (31.5 percent), computer scientists (30.5 percent), and other relatively well-paid positions.⁴⁷

If we look at racial and ethnic composition, we see that blacks and Hispanics are overrepresented in the working class and underrepresented in the middle class, patterns similar to women, but even more pronounced. From Table 2 we see that in 2010, blacks were 10.8 percent of the total employed labor force, but they were 12.7 percent of the working class and only 7.6 percent of the middle class. Hispanics were 14.3 percent of all those with jobs, but held only 8.6 percent of middle class positions and 17.8 percent of working class jobs. Asians, on the other hand, were

disproportionately represented in middle class positions, particularly the sciences, engineering, and higher education. Non-Hispanic whites were also overrepresented in the middle and capitalist classes.

We see from all these numbers that women, blacks, and Hispanics are a larger proportion of the working class than they are of the labor force as a whole. They are by no means absent from middle class positions of authority, but generally women and minorities are in the lower-paid sections of the working class and in the lower ranks of management and professional life, compared with men or white people. Following this pattern, women and minorities are also found among capitalists, but their businesses are small by national standards.⁴⁸ The largest black-owned business in 1998 had sales under \$400 million.⁴⁹

TABLE 2 Percentages of employed labor force by gender, race, and ethnicity, 2010

	WOMEN	MEN	BLACKS	ASIANS	HISPANICS	NON-HISPANIC WHITES
Employed labor force	47.2	52.8	10.8	4.8	14.3	70.1
Working class	50.1	49.9	12.7	4.1	17.8	65.3
Middle class*	42.6	57.4	7.6	6.0	8.6	77.8

*includes CEOs and other senior executives in capitalist class

Source: Author calculations based on U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, January 2011, Table 1.

A look at census data showing the number of people of different races, genders, and nationalities in hundreds of occupations reveals a surprisingly mixed labor force at all levels. Economist Doug Henwood wrote of the 1990s:

The largest occupational category for white men in 1990 [the single occupation employing the largest number of people] was salaried managers and administrators, a title that also appears on the top ten list for black men (#8), Hispanic men (#7), and white women (#6). Secretary is the leading job label for white women—but it’s also number one for Hispanic women and number three for black women. Truck driving is the leading employer of black men—but it’s second for both Hispanics and whites. “Janitors and cleaners” is the biggest occupation for Hispanic men, and second for black men—but sixth for white men. More black women are nurses’ aides and orderlies than any other occupation—but it’s the ninth biggest employer of white women. The privileged titles usually appear higher and more often for whites, especially men, but there’s no shortage of gritty jobs for white folks either.⁵⁰ The 2000 census data revealed a similar landscape of common occupations within genders. “Driver/Sales Workers and Truck Drivers” was the largest occupation for white, Hispanic, and black men and the seventh largest for Asian men. Janitor was the third-largest occupation for black men, fifth for Hispanic men, and eighth for white and Asian men. Secretary was the largest occupation in the United States and the largest category for white women, third for black and Hispanic women, and fifth for Asian women. Cashier was the second-largest occupation for Hispanic, black, and Asian women, and fourth for white women. With 3.1 million people, it was the fifth-largest job category in the workforce.

Occupations are often sex-segregated, however. There were almost 1.5 million carpenters in 2000, the largest construction occupation. Ninety-eight percent were men. Of the thirty-one occupations with more than one million workers in 2000, auto service technicians and mechanics, carpenters, construction laborers, drivers/sales workers and truck drivers, and grounds maintenance workers all were more than 90 percent men. For women, child-care workers, receptionists and information clerks, registered nurses, secretaries and administrative assistants, and teacher assistants were at least 90 percent women. In only five of the top thirty-one occupations was the difference between the percentage of men and women less than fifteen points: accountants and auditors, cooks, marketing and sales managers, miscellaneous assemblers, and postsecondary teachers.⁵¹

Neither the working class nor the middle class is uniform in gender, racial, or ethnic composition. Each class presents a mosaic. Looking at the mosaic another way, we see that gender,

racial, and ethnic groups are also not uniform. Each is divided by class, as reflected in Table 3. We see that the working class is the majority of every ethnic and racial group, but there's quite a bit of variation in class composition among them. The working class accounted for 53 percent of Asians in 2010, but 77 percent of Hispanics. At the same time, 73 percent of blacks and 58 percent of non-Hispanic whites were in the working class. Compared with the employed population as a whole, men, Asians, and non-Hispanic whites were disproportionately overrepresented in the middle and capitalist classes, while women, blacks, and Hispanics were overrepresented in the working class. While women and nonwhites were virtually unknown in the capitalist class fifty years ago, there are now quite a few women and black chief executives of major corporations, although still greatly underrepresented at that level compared with their numbers in the labor force.⁵²

This complex set of relationships and identities is what we have to sort through to make sense of and then influence the politics and economics of U.S. society.

Race is not just a numerical category in a demographic division of the population. Race is a central feature of social dynamics in the United States. It has a long history as the foundation of slavery, and then as the basis of the Jim Crow laws of legal segregation and racial discrimination that followed formal emancipation. This history has had profound implications for all Americans, not just those of African descent.

TABLE 3 Class composition of racial and ethnic groups, 2010

	TOTAL EMPLOYED IN MILLIONS	PERCENT IN WORKING CLASS	PERCENT IN MIDDLE CLASS	PERCENT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVES
Women	65.7	66	34	25.5
Men	73.4	59	41	74.5
Black	15.0	73	27	2.8
Asian	6.7	53	47	3.2
Hispanic	19.9	77	23	4.8
Non-Hispanic White	97.7	58	42	89.2
TOTAL	139.1	62	38	100.0

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, January 2011, Table 1.

A rich literature has developed since the 1970s demonstrating that the social meanings of race are not tied to physical traits, nor is racism psychologically innate. We have come to understand that race has played, and in many ways continues to play, a role as an instrument of social control, dividing “white” from “black” in a workforce that from early colonial days threatened rebellion, and, from the point of view of ruling elites, needed discipline. The English colonial ruling elites of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave special social meaning to the idea of race as they created the reality of chattel slavery for people of African descent. They used racism and the new institutions of slavery to divide from each other the indentured laborers of English and African descent who were working in the colonies.⁵³

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka addressed the legacy of this history in the 2008 presidential campaign in an address to the convention of the United Steelworkers union meeting in Las Vegas as the U.S. presidential campaign was heating up. Trumka spoke directly to the racist attitudes that some workers continued to express in their resistance to voting for Barack Obama: A lot of them are good union people; they just can't get past this idea that there's something wrong with voting for a black man. Well, those of us who know better can't afford to look the other way. I'm not one for quoting dead philosophers, but back in the 1700s, Edmund Burke said: “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.” Well, there's no evil that's inflicted more pain and more suffering than racism—and it's something we in the labor movement have a special responsibility to challenge. It's our special responsibility because we know, better than anyone else, how racism is used to divide working people. We've seen how companies set worker against worker—how they throw whites a few extra crumbs off the table—and how we all

end up losing. But we've seen something else, too. We've seen that when we cross that color line and stand together no one can keep us down. That's why the CIO was created. That's why industrial unions were the first to stand up against lynching and segregation. People need to know that it was the Steel Workers Organizing Committee—this union—that was founded on the principle of organizing all workers without regard to race. That's why the labor movement—imperfect as we are—is the most integrated institution in American life.⁵⁴ I have left out of this discussion of classes any mention of the “underclass,” a term often used in popular and sociological discussions of poverty. We will look at poverty and the so-called underclass in detail in chapter 4. But for our purposes here, to the extent that we are talking about people engaged in the illegal drug business as the “underclass,” there is no reason to believe that the class composition of that industry is any different from that of legal ones. The drug trade includes owner-entrepreneurs and managerial and supervisory personnel who have the same authority as their small (and sometimes not-so-small) capitalist and middle class counterparts in the legal economy. And the business includes people engaged in the making and distribution of products who are working class in every sense of the word. Illegal gambling and prostitution operations may be smaller and may typically lack the layers of middle management characteristic of larger businesses, both legal and illegal, but the class divisions between business owners and those who work for them reflect the class divisions of the comparable visible economy.

If anything, the power differences that characterize class division in illegal sectors must be greater than those we see in legal businesses, where working people have recourse to the protections of labor law. There is, in short, no reason to think that the illegal sector is different enough in its organization to make class differences any less striking or important.

Class Ambiguities

Class is not caste, a social status acquired at birth from one's parents and indelibly marked on the person for life. As we will see more fully in the next chapter, there is limited mobility across class lines. Yet, some cross-class mobility and ambiguities at the boundaries between classes should not lead us to conclude that classes don't exist, or are arbitrary divisions among more-or-less equal human beings. Classes are central elements in our society, growing out of and in turn shaping our economy, politics, culture, and history.

The majority of people are in the working class, those who do the direct work of production and who typically have little control over their jobs and no supervisory authority over others. The working class is the clear majority of the labor force, 63 percent. At the top of the class order, controlling the big business apparatus, is the capitalist class, about 2 percent of the labor force. A small fraction of the capitalist class operates on a national scale, and an even smaller network of several tens of thousands of interlocking directors among the largest of businesses is the core of the national ruling class. Between the capitalist class and the working class is the middle class, about 35 percent of the labor force.

While each of these classes is distinct from the others, all members of a particular class do not, of course, have the same degree of power, the same income, status, or lifestyle as others in the class. Each class is diverse—in skill, authority, occupation, race, gender, ethnicity, and every other characteristic that human beings possess. It even happens that individuals in one class can have attributes most often identified with another class, as when some skilled workers make more money than some professionals, or some managers work longer hours and have more stress than some production workers. Because some working class people go in and out of business, with small stores or contracting outfits that mostly serve their working class neighbors, a degree of overlap exists between working class and middle class experience. In many neighborhoods, there is more than a little personal identification across this porous class boundary.

Faced with such diversity and apparent incoherence, it may be tempting to give up the idea that class is a meaningful category and just focus on each individual, or fall back to the common belief that there are simply the rich, the poor, and the broad middle class in between. But an analogy

with water—though a bit of a stretch—will help explain why it makes sense to keep class categories as I am defining them, despite the variety of individual experience within each class.

Water takes different forms, ice, liquid, and steam, even though in each state it is still H₂O. Each state is distinct, yet within each wide variations can occur. Liquid water can be cold or hot or lukewarm. Ice can take different forms too, and under different conditions of pressure and volume, steam can vary in temperature and other properties. The three states of water are even fuzzy at the edges, when it is not clear exactly what is going on. Is slush ice or liquid? How many bubbles have to form at the bottom of a pan of water, and how many have to rise to the top and roil the surface, before we say the water is boiling? Yet these variations within states of water, and ambiguities at the edges, don't stop us from knowing that water takes different forms, even if it's all H₂O.

Thinking along these lines tells us about class as well. We are all people. The capitalist, the worker, the middle class professional or business person, all flesh and blood, all with hopes for ourselves and our children, most of us trying to do the best we can. But this underlying sameness, which is terribly important to remember and respect, in no way means that we are all equally powerful or that no systematic differences exist among us. Our different class standings cause us to act differently, live differently, and have different experiences and life chances, despite our underlying resemblance in a common humanity.

Within classes, people are different. An unskilled factory sweeper is in the same class as a radiology technician, a postal letter carrier, a bank teller, a machinist. The professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs of the middle class vary widely not only in the content of their work but in their social status, income, power. Among capitalists, too, are the big and the small, national and local power brokers, the well-connected and the relatively isolated. But despite the variations among people within each class, it still makes sense to view the world as made up of distinct classes, because, in the end, workers do not have the power of the middle class, let alone the capitalists, either big or small.

In the last decade of the twentieth century and through the first decade of the twenty-first, nonstandard work arrangements spread. Instead of holding a regular job, more and more people were working as temps, as independent contractors, as franchise operators. These new work relations were often forced on people after they had lost a regular job to downsizing or a company move or failure. These new arrangements usually brought with them a reduction in living standards, increased insecurity, an end to employer-provided pensions and insurance. Depending on how narrowly or broadly we define “temporary” or “contingent” jobs, in 1997 anywhere from 1.9 to 4.4 percent of the labor force was in nonstandard employment. Fewer than half were employed part-time.

A February 2005 government survey revealed that the fraction of workers in on-call, temp service, and contract-provided positions had remained unchanged since 2001, but the number of independent contractors had risen. While all these categories of employment are considered “contingent” (with no expectation that the job would continue), the people holding them, and their attitudes towards their employment, differed dramatically. The 10.3 million independent contractors tended to be professionals, older, white, and men, with 82 percent reporting preference for their job status compared with regular employment. The 4.5 million temp services, on-call, and contract workers, on the other hand, tended to be women, African-American or Latino, and younger, and only 32 percent reported preference for their work situation over a regular job.⁵⁵

The largest category of people with nonstandard work relations is the category of independent contractors, consultants, and freelance workers. Many of these are professionals and people involved in managerial or sales work and thus part of the middle class. But some “independent contractors” and “franchise operators” are not the middle class people their titles suggest.

In 1998, forty thousand limousine drivers (not taxi drivers) were working in New York City. Some had traditional employee status, but many were independent contractors, forced to lease their cars from car service companies. In these lease arrangements, which have the appearance of a business contract between two independent parties, the driver takes on the status of a franchise

holder, but in reality is completely controlled by the car service company.

What class does the “independent” limo driver belong to? The question is not rhetorical; the answer controls whether the drivers can organize a union and force the company to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. In 1997, when drivers at one company wanted to organize, the company claimed they were independent contractors, not employees, and so not protected by labor law that gives workers the right to organize unions and requires their employer to negotiate in good faith. But the National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency that decides these disputes, dismissed the company’s claim and ordered a union representation election. The drivers overwhelmingly voted the union in.⁵⁶

The story of these limousine drivers is repeated wherever employers try to mask power relations with the veneer of a professional or entrepreneurial title bestowed on workers. Class is not in the name. Class is in the power relationships people experience.

In which class is a secretary who also has a Mary Kay franchise on the side, supplying and managing three other women? What do we call an electrician who works for his city’s board of education but also has his own contracting business? In what class do we put a family with a husband who works in an auto plant and a wife who is a pediatrician? Is a person who owns a machine shop employing twenty-five people on two shifts and who works side by side with his employees on the floor two mornings a week while taking care of the business the rest of the time, a capitalist or in the middle class as a small businessman?

The ambiguity of such borderline cases, and the wide variety of experience within classes, is testimony to the fact that classes are not simply boxes or static categories into which we pigeonhole people. Classes are formed in the dynamics of power and wealth creation, and are by their nature a bit messy. Classes are more complicated, more interesting, and more real than the arbitrary income levels used to define class in the conventional wisdom.