

Critical Analysis 2:
Redefining the American Class System

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Abstract

How does Paul Fussell define the social classes? Compare Fussell's model of class with that of Domhoff. What are strengths and weaknesses of Fussell's model of class?

Introduction

Paul Fussell, in his book *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, defines the American Class system in rather an odd way. Fussell states that the American class system is a combination of the amount of money you have, the amount of political power you have, and your social prestige; he notes that social prestige is the most important of the three aspects of the American class system.

Fussell goes on to state that the American class system is a very "murky" subject and that class in America is seen differently depending on your class status. So that, the lower class (prole-short for proletariat) sees class as based upon the amount of money you have. Whereas, the middle class focuses on the type of education and job that you hold. While, finally, the upper-class sees it as a set of values, styles and tastes.

In analysing the class structure in America, Fussell concentrates mainly on things that people can avoid (were they conscious of it.) In other words, Fussell will concentrate on the choices made by the class members, rather than, rely on things that they cannot avoid (such as race, ethnicity, religion, politics &c.)

Class Distinction

Fussell begins with a distinction in the "standard" view of class break down in America. The traditional sociologist's model of the class break down is roughly as follows:

- Upper Class
- Upper-Middle Class
- Middle Class
- Lower-Middle Class
- Lower Class

Fussell, on the other hand, breaks the classes into the following sections:

- Top out-of-sight
- Upper
- Upper middle
- Middle
- High Prole
- Mid Prole
- Low Prole
- Destitute
- Bottom out-of-sight

The former model is based almost entirely on the amount of income, or amount of money that you are worth. Whereas, Fussell states that money alone does not define your class, hence the latter model.

In fact, Fussell points out that given two families living next to each other making roughly the same amount of money, except that one's blue collar and the other's white collar, their difference in behaviour and attitude, as well as style, is much more noticeable. Here are two families, which are not at all identical, yet their income is the same. It's not the fact that the uppers have money, Fussell underscores, but rather *how* they have their money that matters.

The Icing

The top layers of the American Status System can be defined as the top out-of-sight, the upper, and the upper Middle class.

The top out-of-sights are those who are removed from the watchful eye of the public. These include individuals who are so rich that they have houses in the middle of nowhere, far removed from the public. These individuals successfully avoid the press, the census takers, the probing sociologists.

The upper class differs from the top out-of site in that, although they inherit quite a bit of money, some of it is earned. Their work could include participation in think-tanks, foundations, and controlling popular banks. In other words, this class is the one that would be CEO's and CIO's. As opposed to the top-out-of-sight, this class is *very much* aware of other's watchful eyes and is very ostentatious about their wealth.

The basic litmus paper test of this class to to see the house that they live in. If it's grand and (in the fullest sense of the word) awesome, they are upper-class (or worse-as Fussell is quick to point out.)

The upper-middle class is almost identical in wealth to the two classes above it. The major difference is that this class almost invariably earned most of it. This may have been done through standard businesses such as oil, law, and medicine. It is defined by gender-role reversal, costly educations, conservative on sexual display (eg: nudity.) It's also defined by the size of their houses; more specifically, the number of rooms that they don't necessarily *need*.

The Cake & Crumbs

The middle layers of the American Status System, according to Fussell, consists of the middle-class, and the high, mid, and low prole[tarians.]

The middle class is studded with class insecurity. This is more important than the amount of money they have, or their income. For example, Fussell states that not smoking is very upper-class, but as soon as you draw attention to that fact about yourself, you'll be instantly dropped into middle-class! Another example is in the need for compliments. Where the upper-class *know* that their items (in their house let's say) are good, and expensive there is no question of their value. The middle-class, however, because of their insecurity, need constantly be reminded, and assured through complements.

The middle-class is always concerned with what others think about them. They are always worried about doing things *just right*. Reminds me of the television show "Keeping Up Appearances" whose main character goes to even the lengths of changing the pronunciation of her name (Mrs. Bucket) from bucket (as in *of water*), to bouquet (as in *of flowers*). Fussell points out that knitting is pretty much a thing of the uppers. After all, they have the free time necessary for spending hours on end not working. But the

difference between a sweater knitted by the uppers and the sweater knitted by the middle class is the little label stating the knitter's name. So that 'hand-made by so and so' would be middle, while dropping you down to high prole if the wording is changed to 'hand-crafted by so and so.'

Hence, their eating out at foreign restaurants ordering things they painfully attempt to pronounce just right. It's their moment in the spotlight to order people around for the night, and "live like kings." They don't worry about the actual quality of the food, rather for the place's elegance!

The high, mid, and low proles are characterised by blue collar work. The high proles are skilled workers and craftsmen. The mid proles are machinists, and service sector employees. And the low proles are mainly unskilled labourers. They are all suckers for advertisements and brand names. Oft times will display it prominently on their T-shirts, or reversed baseball caps with the machine (snap lock) in front, showing the whole world of their cunning use of technology.

They all tend to choose places of leisure that (as Fussell quotes from **Arthur Shostak's** book *Blue-Collar Life* (1969)) tend to affirm what they already know about rather than something that will challenge their worldview. Fast-food and everything predictable is the mark of the proles. Hence the popularity of McDonald's, and all you can eat buffets.

Fussell states that the high proles are afraid of slipping down. As a result high proles are constantly pointing out the differences between them and the unskilled labourers. They have a certain contempt for the lower classes (because they haven't gotten as far) and for the middle class (for being slaves, sheep, to big corporations). They would probably be the ones buying expensive televisions, stereos. (On the other hand, the uppers and tops either don't own a television in their living room, or hide it away behind some painting.)

These brief overviews of how Fussell defines the classes is very much a "straw man's" version. But is stated to give an overall picture of what Fussell is stressing as important in the classes. That social class is not necessarily linked to money. In other words, money is a necessary but not sufficient component of the upper class. To underscore this point, in fact, Fussell states that you can be the richest person in the world, but immediately drop to prole or middle class status based *solely* on your elocutive skills.

The Fussell Vs. Domhoff Class Analysis

Although, at first glance, the Fussell model of the American Status System (Class System) may seem to have nothing in common with the G. William Domhoff Class System analysis, [*Who Rules America? Power and Politics in the Year 2000*, 1998] they fit together very well. Both authors are approaching class status from two differing perspectives.

Fussell approaches class as a set of values, judgements, opinions, styles &c. In other words, he concentrates on the status “symbols” that demarcate class. Whereas, Domhoff approaches class through the institutions, cliques and power struggle between the extremes to capture the middles.

Domhoff concentrated mainly on the power-elite, the cross section of the social upper class, the corporate community and the policy-formation organisations. Since Domhoff took on this line of attack, there was little to mention about the “lowers,” apart from a by-the-way fashion. Yet many of the aspects of the upper class that were mentioned in Domhoff’s book were either implicitly, or explicitly delineated in Fussell’s book.

For Fussell, the opposite is true. Since Fussell is doing a cross section of the classes, and concentrating on these symbols of class, he singles out each class and some of their major aspects. While listing these policy-formation networks in a by-the-way manner. Listed below are some examples of the overlapping similarities between the two authors.

Educational Life

Domhoff has an entire chapter devoted to the upper class social life entitled “The Corporate Community and The Upper Class.” In this chapter he places many of the upper class symbols dispersed throughout the Fussell book.

Like Fussell, Domhoff notes the hesitancy of people talking, or “acknowledging” the class system in America. In addition, Domhoff talks about the preparatory schools (boarding schools) for the upper class. He states “The linchpins in the upper-class educational system are the dozens of boarding schools...” [Domhoff, p.82] Fussell iterates “...But those who postpone Ivy ambitions until college-admission time are already in class arrears...it is the really exclusive prep school that counts...” [Fussell, p.140]

Domhoff states the importance of going to college at prestigious universities. This is affirmed by Fussell: “... Ivy still extends an irresistible appeal to the upper-middle class ... it’s essential to ‘go away’ preferably some dis-

tance ... (unless you happen to live in Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, Providence, Hannover, or the like)” [Fussell, p.140]

Sporting Life

Domhoff states that “Sporting activities are the basis for most of the specialised clubs of the upper class.” [Domhoff, p.87] He lists yachting, sailing, lawn tennis and squash. Domhoff also lists a few more animal sports (using Fussell’s words for these) “...devotion to horses-owning them, breeding them, riding them, racing them, chasing small animals while sitting on them...” [Fussell, p.33]

But where Domhoff brushes over this list of sporting events of the upper class, to continue to talk about the social clubs, Fussell continues in detail about the uppers, middles, and proles sporting activities. Fussell notes that because yachting is the most expensive sport, it beats all other recreations for upper class display. [Fussell, p.112] In fact, he goes into great detail denoting the differences in lengths, and what this means about your class (bigger, but not family style &c.) Fussell ends sports with the prole’s favourite pass time, bowling!

Policy Formation Networks

Domhoff needless to say, has quite a bit on the policy formation network front. Domhoff points to the upper class as being controlling factors in think-tanks, and foundations. Usually through coercive means (ie: ejecting a dissenting member, or financially pressuring a group to an opinion - consider the Council for Economic Development issue in the 1970’s [Domhoff, p.153])

Fussell makes a similar observation of the upper class: “It’s likely to make its money by controlling banks...think tanks, and foundations...the Council on Foreign Relations, the Foreign Policy Association, the Committee for Economic Development...” [Fussell, p.31]

Although Fussell acknowledges these policy formation networks and the role played by (as Domhoff would put it) the power-elite, it’s not what Fussell is interested in. Hence, it’s quickly mentioned (and as quoted above, quite explicitly) through the various councils, foundations and think-tanks, which is left in that un-quenching by-the-way state.

Conclusion

In summary, Fussell's work doesn't in anyway detract or negate from Domhoff's views. In fact, the best way to describe their works is that they complement each other. Each fills in the gaps that are left unanswered by their particular interests. Fussell and Domhoff overlap in areas concerning the upper class; where Domhoff concentrates on the upper class and their power relations in our society, Fussell picks up the slack on the "mids" and "proles" to tell us the other side of the story.