

125. Proletariat

There are three eras of the proletariat. For the ancient world, the proletariat consisted of the urban landless poor, including not only wage laborers, but also lower artisans and traders. Between ancient times and modernity, the proletariat had an academic meaning for aristocratic scholars of the classics; and, in the nineteenth century, Socialists and Communists used the term to designate the emergent industrial working class. If there is a fourth era of the proletariat, it is characterized by its decline both as a term and as an historical social force.

In sixth century BC Rome, the term *proletarii* named the lowest class of the census. *Proletarii*, meaning “prolific people,” were named after the perception that their contribution to the state consisted of nothing but their progeny. Montesquieu and Rousseau used the term, borrowed directly from Cicero, only in their writings on ancient Rome, while Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary of 1756 defined the *Proletarian* as “vile; vulgar.”

Drawing on this noble vocabulary, the term “proletaire” was first used to give a name to the masses that emerged from historical obscurity during the French Revolution (Lovell 1988). Later, in the 1830s and 1840s, Jean Charles Leonard Sismondi, Auguste Blanqui, Lorenz von Stein, and other Socialists introduced the term “proletariat,” as distinct from the singular *proletaire*. The distinctiveness of this third era was confirmed in 1844, when Karl Marx and Frederick Engels used it to refer specifically to the wage laborers of the capitalist mode of production.

Engels wrote extensively about the proletariat in his study of the conditions of the working class in England when most commentators on the new class of industrial workers continued throughout the nineteenth century to refer only to the poor (Booth 1889–1903), the underworld (Mayhew 1862), the industrial residuum (Bosanquet 1898), the ragged (Hollingshead 1861), or the Rookeries (Beames 1852). The introduction of the term “proletariat” in 1843 marked a turning point in Marx’s writing, which had previously discussed the “poor.” It was also a turning point in the political theory of the proletariat itself.

Uniquely, Marx’s theory of the proletariat cast it as the agent of a world revolution, which would replace capitalism with

socialism. From the 1840s onwards, Marx and Engels based their politics on “the real, historical proletarian movement and its experience of class struggle” (Blackburn 1976, 33). Partly in response to political events, however, by 1850, Marx (2010) revised the simplified image of the revolutionary proletariat and rejected the Gotha Programme’s overstatement of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat and ridiculed the caricatured depiction of “all other classes [as] only one reactionary mass” (Marx 2023, 61).

The subsequent history of the proletariat and its discourses, prior to the development of a twentieth-century theory of class (Linebaugh and Rediker 2002), has been characterized by diminution, erosion, and decline. Since the middle of the twentieth-century, after the average income of the working class in the world’s leading economies more than doubled in a short period, the idea of the proletariat as without property seemed out of date. Subsequently, the concept of the proletariat has been replaced by categories such as the “affluent worker” (Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al. 1968) even though the phrase “The proletarian is without property” (Marx and Engels 2015, 244) was not intended to refer to workers lacking “washing-machines, television and the rest” (Hoggart 1960, 29). As Engels clarified in a footnote in 1888, the concept of the proletariat as a propertyless class referred to them “having no means of production of their own [and therefore being] reduced to selling their labour power in order to live” (Przeworski 1985, 57).

Smaller classes other than the traditional “big classes” of upper class, middle class, and working class or proletariat are regarded by social scientists as more realistic. This intellectual tendency reaches its limit point in the study of microclasses (Grusky and Sørensen 2001) that correspond to the actual differential field of “fine-grained occupational categories” (Wright 2015, x). Sociologists and other experts argue that the proletariat has been disappearing for decades. A recent study says that less than 15 percent of the U.K. population are “traditional working class” or proletariat (Savage 2015). However, if we understand the proletariat as “having no means of production” and thereby add the new categories of “working poor,” “affluent workers,” and “precariat” to the “traditional working class” then the same study can be reinterpreted as demon-

strating that over 50 percent of the U.K. is working class. Neoliberals in the 1990s said that the traditional working class had vanished since the “aspirational working class” had become middle class, leaving behind the “rump” of the underclass relying on state handouts (Jones 2011). In a parallel development, the Wages for Housework movement said “Waged men ... occupied a position of oppression of women.”

It is possible to detect a normative decline of the proletariat from subculture (Hebdige 1979) to underclass (Wacquant 2022) and the chav (Tyler 2013) in which the working class has descended from the agent of “symbolic resistance” (Hall and Jefferson 1975) to being demonized and stigmatized as well as being blamed for the rise of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom. Today, the proletarian politics of class has been eclipsed by a middle-class politics of work focused on the cognitariat (Berardi 2013), the precariat (Standing 2011), and the projectariat (Szreder 2021). Here, the proletariat is subsumed under a politics of the degradation of middle-class work, which emphasizes the gig economy not casualization, the networked 24/7 worker not the shift worker and “Bullshit jobs” not “shit jobs” (Graeber 2018). As a result of the weakening of the workers movement and the rise of right-wing populism, the politics of class has migrated from the proletariat to the underclass or the lumpenproletariat (Barrow 2020) and an emphasis on the middle class, especially the Professional Managerial Class (Ehrenreich 1977).

Analysis of the data shows that “most of the story about the ‘white working class’ is untrue or, at best ambiguous” (Bray 2017). Also, the traditional workerist image of the proletariat as white and male is being challenged by reconceptualizing workers as black, brown, yellow, female, Oriental, Asian, African, and South American. This is one of the major tasks of a twenty-first-century theory of class (Linebaugh and Rediker 2002).

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See also

Class; Lumpenproletariat; Petit Bourgeois; Exploitation; Surplus Value