

## MM5 – Media Representation of Class

### Understanding Social Class

Social class is a complex and evolving concept within sociology, influencing various aspects of society, including education, family dynamics, and crime. Traditionally, social class has been associated with a person's wealth, occupation, and education. However, over time, sociologists have developed more nuanced understandings of class, reflecting its multifaceted nature.

### Traditional Class Systems

Historically, Karl Marx's perspective on social class was straightforward, dividing society into two main classes: the bourgeoisie (the ruling capitalist class) and the proletariat (the working class). This dichotomy was based primarily on economic factors, particularly the ownership of the means of production.

As societies evolved, so did the understanding of class. A more traditional class system emerged, commonly recognized as the working class, middle class, and upper class. In this system, an individual's class was determined by a combination of their wealth, occupation, and level of education. For example, those with significant wealth, high-status occupations, and advanced education were classified as upper class, while those with fewer resources and lower-status occupations were considered working class.

However, this system is not without its challenges. There are instances where individuals may belong to different classes depending on which factor—wealth, occupation, or education—is given the most weight. For instance, someone might have a working-class income but hold a middle-class occupation and an upper-class education, creating ambiguity in their class identification.

### The New Class System

In response to the limitations of traditional class categorizations, the British Social Attitudes Survey introduced a more detailed class system approximately a decade ago. This system identifies seven distinct classes, reflecting the complexity of modern society. It assesses class based on three primary elements:

1. **Economic Capital:** This includes an individual's financial resources, occupation, and assets.
2. **Social Capital:** This considers a person's social networks, relationships, and connections.
3. **Cultural Capital:** This reflects how individuals engage in leisure activities and cultural practices.

Despite offering a more nuanced approach, this new system still presents challenges. Individuals may find themselves categorized in multiple classes depending on which type of capital is emphasized. For example, someone may have significant economic capital, placing them in the established middle class, but their social and cultural capital might align them with the precariat, a term for those in precarious and insecure living conditions.

The complexity of class determination underscores the fluidity of social class in modern society. It is essential to consider these nuances when examining how class is represented in various contexts, including the media.

### **Media Representations of Class**

Neo-Marxist perspectives provide a critical lens through which to understand media representations of class. Neo-Marxists argue that the media serves to maintain the cultural hegemony of the dominant capitalist class. **Cultural hegemony** refers to the control of cultural norms and values by the ruling class, ensuring that these norms become widely accepted as the standard in society.

According to Neo-Marxists, the media operates as an **ideological state apparatus**—a term popularized by Louis Althusser—which transmits the dominant capitalist ideology throughout society. This means that the representations of class in the media are not neutral but are influenced by the interests of the ruling bourgeoisie. The media, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of class, often reinforcing existing class structures and inequalities.

**Ralph Miliband**, a prominent Marxist sociologist, emphasized that the media's portrayal of class serves to perpetuate the status quo by promoting the interests and values of the capitalist class. Through its representation of class, the media contributes to the broader societal acceptance of capitalist norms, often obscuring the realities of class struggles and inequalities.

### **Media Representations of the Upper Class.**

When examining media representations of the upper class and the wealthy, we can categorize them into three key groups: the monarchy, the traditional upper class, and the newly wealthy. Each of these groups is portrayed in distinct ways, reflecting broader societal attitudes and cultural values.

#### **The Monarchy**

The monarchy occupies a unique position in media representations, often portrayed with a blend of reverence and relatability. Sociologist Tom Nairn has noted that the media tends to present the monarchy in a positive light, emphasizing qualities such as "niceness, decency, and ordinariness." Despite their extraordinary roles, members of the royal family are depicted as being both "like us" and "not like us." For instance, the late Queen Elizabeth II was often portrayed as a dedicated working mother who managed to run the country while raising her children, embodying an idealized version of the nuclear family.

This portrayal extends beyond their personal lives into their public duties, where the monarchy is seen as reinforcing national identity. Through their participation in traditional events, such as the laying of the wreath at the Cenotaph or attending major sporting events, the royals symbolize what it means to be British. However, the monarchy is also portrayed as an ongoing "soap opera," particularly in recent years with the media's focus on the personal lives and relationships of figures like Harry and Meghan or William and Catherine. This dual representation creates a sense of a safe, real-life drama that the public can engage with, while also reinforcing national values and identity.

### **The Traditional Upper Class**

The traditional upper class, often associated with "old money," is portrayed as living an idealized lifestyle. These individuals are typically shown as embodying wealth, power, and a certain lifestyle that is both enviable and aspirational. Television shows like *Made in Chelsea* highlight this group, presenting them as generous yet largely oblivious to their inherent privileges. The focus is on their lifestyle rather than their lineage or societal contributions, with little acknowledgment of the systemic advantages that come with their social status.

At times, the upper class is depicted with a sense of nostalgia, particularly in historical dramas like *Downton Abbey* or *Gosford Park*. These portrayals often evoke a longing for a bygone era, where the rigid class structures of the past are romanticized. In these representations, the upper class is seen as eccentric or endearing, with their wealth and status presented as integral to the narrative of history, often overlooking the inequalities inherent in such a system.

### **The Newly Wealthy**

In contrast to the traditional upper class, the newly wealthy—those who have acquired significant wealth in recent times—are often portrayed differently in the media. According to sociologist Newman, these individuals are frequently represented in a positive light, embodying the concept of meritocracy. They are depicted as having "made it" through hard work and determination, serving as a symbol of the potential for upward social mobility.

This group is often showcased in reality TV shows such as *The Only Way Is Essex* or *The Real Housewives*, where the focus is on their material success rather than their background or social responsibilities. The emphasis is on their consumption patterns—luxury cars, private jets, and extravagant lifestyles—suggesting that these are the rewards of success and what the general public should aspire to achieve. This portrayal aligns with the idea of false class consciousness, as it promotes the notion that anyone can achieve similar wealth through effort, thereby masking the structural barriers that prevent true social mobility.

### **Changing Representations**

While the media has traditionally portrayed the upper class and wealthy in a positive light, there is evidence of a shifting dynamic. Increasingly, there is scrutiny of these groups for their lack of acknowledgment of privilege and their detachment from the realities of ordinary life. Newman argues that tabloid media, in particular, dedicates substantial coverage to the lives of the wealthy elite, often oscillating between idolizing them and tearing them down through gossip and scandal. This shift reflects a growing awareness and critique of the disparities between the wealthy elite and the general population. However, despite these emerging critiques, the cultural hegemony persists, promoting the idea that the lifestyles of the upper class and wealthy are desirable and worthy of emulation.

### **Media Representations of the Middle Class**

The middle class is often portrayed as the norm in media, representing the majority of society. This group is frequently overrepresented in television dramas, comedies, and advertisements, reflecting

a lifestyle that is seen as desirable and attainable for many. This portrayal reinforces the class structure and justifies societal inequalities by suggesting that with enough effort, anyone can achieve middle-class status.

### **The Middle Class as the Norm**

In media, the middle class is typically depicted as the standard or default social class. Sociologist Edmund Leach referred to the "cereal packet family" as the idealized representation of the middle class—a nuclear family that enjoys a comfortable and secure lifestyle. This portrayal is prevalent in television shows and advertisements, where middle-class families are shown living in well-kept homes, driving nice cars, and participating in leisure activities such as vacations and dining out. This idealization of the middle class serves to normalize their lifestyle and values. The message conveyed is that being middle class is not only desirable but also achievable for most people. This reflects a meritocratic ideal where hard work and success are seen as the keys to attaining a middle-class lifestyle. The media, therefore, plays a significant role in promoting the idea that social mobility is within reach, subtly encouraging conformity to middle-class norms.

### **Advertising and Middle-Class Consumption**

Advertising is particularly focused on middle-class consumers. Products and services are often marketed with the assumption that the target audience is middle class, emphasizing the ability to afford luxuries such as holidays abroad, the latest technology, and premium brands of food and drink. This aligns with the "cereal packet family" ideal, where consumption is a marker of success and stability.

The influence of middle-class values is evident in the types of families portrayed in advertisements. While traditional nuclear families remain common, there has been a gradual shift toward more diverse representations. For example, in recent years, brands like Campbell's Soup have featured same-sex couples in their advertising, reflecting a broader, more inclusive view of the middle class. Despite some backlash from certain segments of the public, these changes indicate a slowly evolving representation of what constitutes a middle-class family.

### **Middle-Class Concerns in Media Content**

The content of newspapers and news outlets often reflects middle-class concerns, such as the decline of moral standards, pride in national heritage, climate change, and the cost of living crisis. These issues are presented as universal, but they primarily resonate with a middle-class audience. For instance, the media's focus on the cost of living crisis often centers on the loss of middle-class standards of living, rather than the struggles of those in lower socio-economic brackets. This focus is not coincidental. The majority of media creators—actors, writers, journalists, and producers—come from middle-class backgrounds themselves. Consequently, they create content that reflects their own experiences and concerns. As a result, the media tends to reinforce middle-class values and ideals, often overlooking or misrepresenting the experiences of the working class or those living in poverty.

### **Cultural Hegemony and Middle-Class Values**

The concept of cultural hegemony, introduced by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, helps explain why middle-class values dominate media representations. Cultural hegemony refers to the dominance of a particular set of beliefs, values, and norms in society, which are accepted as the norm by the majority, even if they do not represent everyone's lived experience. In the context of media, middle-class values are portrayed as universal, marginalizing other perspectives and reinforcing the idea that these values are the standard to aspire to.

While the media may occasionally depict alternative lifestyles or critique middle-class norms, the overarching narrative remains centered on middle-class ideals. This reflects the difficulty of breaking away from the dominant cultural narrative, even as society becomes more diverse and complex.

### **Media Representations of the Working Class**

The working class, despite being a significant portion of society, is often underrepresented in the media. This underrepresentation leads to skewed perceptions and reinforces negative stereotypes. While the middle class is frequently portrayed as the norm, the working class is often symbolically annihilated, a concept discussed by sociologist Newman, which means that their achievements and experiences are largely absent from media portrayals.

### **Symbolic Annihilation and Negative Stereotypes**

Symbolic annihilation refers to the lack of representation of a particular group in the media, effectively erasing their experiences from the public narrative. The working class, as Newman points out, suffers from this phenomenon. When they are depicted, it is often in a negative light. Owen Jones argues that this is part of a broader middle-class assault on working-class values, using media as a form of symbolic violence. This symbolic violence manifests in the portrayal of the working class as problematic, often depicted as welfare cheats, drug addicts, or criminals. Moreover, working-class subcultures, such as Mods and Skinheads, are frequently the subject of moral panics, further reinforcing negative stereotypes. Issues that disproportionately affect the working class, like poverty, unemployment, and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, are often overshadowed or ignored in media coverage, contributing to their symbolic annihilation.

### **The Working Class and Media Content**

According to Curran and Seaton, there is an assumption in the media industry that the working class is not interested in serious news. As a result, newspapers aimed at a working-class audience, such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Star*, tend to focus on celebrity gossip, sports news, and sensationalism, rather than in-depth reporting on important social issues.

Marxists argue that the content of these tabloids is designed to distract the working class from the inequalities of capitalism, treating them as passive audiences who are unlikely to challenge the status quo. This perspective suggests that the media reinforces class divisions by limiting the working class's access to serious and informative content.

### **Television and the Stereotyping of the Working Class**

Television shows also contribute to the stereotyping of the working class. For example, *EastEnders*, a popular British soap opera, often reflects negative stereotypes associated with the working class.

The show frequently portrays working-class characters as embroiled in dysfunctional family dynamics, involving numerous marriages, divorces, and single-parent households. The focus on factory work and unskilled labor in these shows fails to capture the full range of working-class experiences and the complexities of their lives.

These portrayals overlook the significant changes that have occurred in working-class communities due to shifts in industry and economic structures. The media's narrow focus on certain stereotypes perpetuates a limited and often negative view of the working class.

### **Pluralist Perspectives and Escapism**

While Marxist critiques of media representations focus on how the working class is marginalized, pluralists offer a different perspective. They argue that the media provides what the working class wants—escapism from the harsh realities of their lives. Pluralists suggest that working-class audiences might prefer content that offers a fantasy or aspirational image, rather than a constant reminder of their struggles.

From this viewpoint, the media is not necessarily demonizing the working class but rather catering to their desires for entertainment that provides a temporary escape from their everyday challenges.

### **Positive Representations of the Working Class**

Despite the prevalent negative stereotypes, there have been efforts to portray the working class in a more sympathetic and realistic light. Films like *The Full Monty*, *Made in Dagenham*, and *Billy Elliot* present the working class as hardworking, resilient, and aspirational. These movies highlight the dignity and strength of working-class individuals, offering a more nuanced and positive representation. In the 1960s, the "Kitchen Sink" genre of films emerged, focusing on the gritty realities of working-class life while maintaining a sense of dignity and realism. These films challenged the dominant narratives by providing a counterpoint to the stereotypical portrayals often seen in mainstream media.

### **Media Representations of Poverty and the Underclass**

Media representations of poverty and the underclass are often more negative and stereotypical than those of other social groups. These portrayals frequently reduce complex human experiences to mere statistics, stripping away the humanity of those living in poverty.

### **Poverty in the Media**

Newman argues that the portrayal of poverty, particularly of the underclass, is overwhelmingly negative. Those in poverty are often depicted in statistical terms—numbers of children living below the poverty line, unemployment rates—without exploring the human impact of these conditions. This statistical approach can distance the audience, making poverty seem like an abstract issue rather than a pressing social concern.

The media frequently links poverty to unemployment and benefits, often implying that people are poor because they are unwilling to work. This narrative ignores the structural issues that contribute to poverty, such as inadequate access to education and employment opportunities. Additionally, there has been a decline in serious documentaries and dramas that explore poverty in depth, with

such content increasingly relegated to streaming services rather than mainstream television. This shift contributes to the symbolic annihilation of poverty, where the experiences of the poor are largely ignored or misrepresented.

### **Stereotypes and Entertainment**

When poverty is depicted in the media, it is often sanitized or framed as entertainment.

McKendrick notes that poverty is frequently shown in a comedic light, as seen in shows like *Shameless* or the older series *Bread*. These portrayals can trivialize the hardships faced by those living in poverty, presenting them as resourceful schemers who manage to get by despite their circumstances.

More troublingly, poverty is also used as a form of entertainment in reality TV shows like *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, where individuals are ridiculed and blamed for their financial struggles. These portrayals perpetuate the stereotype that the poor are responsible for their own situations, ignoring the broader socio-economic factors that contribute to poverty.

### **The Celebration of Capitalism**

Cohen argues that the media spends more time celebrating the successes of capitalism than addressing its negative impacts. Stories of individuals who have risen to wealth through hard work—such as Lord Alan Sugar—are highlighted, reinforcing the idea that anyone can achieve success if they try hard enough. This narrative obscures the reality that capitalism often keeps people trapped in poverty, as the same system that rewards some also exploits others.

The media's failure to connect the dots between wealth and poverty contributes to a culture where the poor are seen as failures rather than victims of a flawed system. This perspective ignores the systemic issues that create and maintain poverty, focusing instead on the supposed moral failings of those who are poor.

### **The Underclass and "Chavs"**

The term "underclass" was popularized by the New Right, particularly Charles Murray, to describe those on benefits who are perceived as lacking the motivation to improve their circumstances. In the media, the underclass is often labeled as "chavs," a derogatory term used to describe individuals seen as undeserving of public sympathy. Sheldrick and McDonald point out that this group is depicted as social scum, portrayed as lazy, criminal, and morally deficient.

The media representation of "chavs" is heavily stereotyped, as seen in characters like Vicky Pollard from *Little Britain* or Lauren from *The Catherine Tate Show*. These characters are often shown as uneducated, promiscuous, and obsessed with gossip, reinforcing negative stereotypes about the underclass. Hayward and Yar argue that the term "chav" has been co-opted as a form of abuse, particularly against young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Shifting Representations**

While negative stereotypes of the underclass persist, there are signs that media portrayals may be shifting. Recent coverage of the cost-of-living crisis has highlighted the struggles faced by those in poverty, offering a more sympathetic view. However, shows like *Benefits Street* and *Can't Pay?*

*We'll Take It Away!* continue to sensationalize poverty, focusing on the most extreme cases to attract viewers.

Overall, the media tends to portray poverty and the underclass in a way that reinforces existing stereotypes rather than exploring the complexities of these social issues. This can be attributed, in part, to the backgrounds of those creating media content, who often come from middle or upper-class backgrounds and may lack a nuanced understanding of poverty.