

Contemporary Class Analysis

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Abstract

A popular thesis in social stratification argues that the middle class is declining. Our chapter argues that this thesis is flawed both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, it mixes up the middle and working class and, empirically, misrepresents the trends that shape the class structure. Our chapter discusses the main concepts of class and proposes a model that grasps the class structure of contemporary Western societies. Based on clearer concepts, labour force surveys clearly show that the early 21st century did not see the demise, but the expansion of the (salaried) middle class. Never in history had so many people been working in managerial, professional and technical jobs. By contrast, over the last four decades, the working class experienced a massive employment decline – and this decline had far-reaching consequences. It has vastly reduced its political clout as shown in decreasing trade union density and strike activity as well as in rising income inequality. Moreover, it has led to a fundamental realignment of class voting and contributed to growing family instability. Rather than eroding the middle class, the last decades have put an end to the working-class century.

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1 Introduction

In the 2010s, the class concept returned to the political limelight after two decades when social classes were fading into oblivion alongside the imploded communist regimes. Over the same period, survey-based sociology had continued, largely undisturbed, to analyse class inequalities – as exemplified by influential books on class differences in educational attainment (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016), social mobility (Breen and Müller 2020) or party choice (Evans and Tilley 2017). However, rather than to thrive in the context of renewed public interest, sociological research on class inequalities appeared largely disconnected from the public debate on the subject. This led to the paradoxical situation where issues of social class gained in political prominence, but were largely discussed in isolation from sociological evidence (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018: 4).

In Europe and the United States, growing public interest for social class has been closely linked with the argument of middle-class decline that prompted the Obama administration to set up a Middle Class Task Force in 2009 and the German government to mandate in 2013 a study “to examine the thesis of middle class erosion”. The depiction of a growing moneyed elite at the top – Thomas Piketty’s (2013) one percent – and a hollowing-out of the labour market – David Autor’s (2010) job polarization – had struck a nerve with the wider public. With a shrinking middle class, it was not just one social class, but a type of society that seemed under threat.

While this doom scenario caught the media headlines,² our chapter argues that the debate on middle-class decline is flawed both conceptually and empirically. By using inadequate concepts of class, this debate mixes up the middle and working class and, as a consequence, misrepresents the empirical trends that have shaped the class structure of affluent societies over the last decades. In Europe and North America, the early 21st century did not see the demise, but the *expansion* of the middle class. Notably the ranks of the salaried middle class swelled as employment grew among managers, professionals and technicians. By contrast, there was a massive decline of the working class. Under pressure from skill-biased technological change and offshoring, the ranks of the working class have thinned massively as the numbers of assemblers and machine operators, farm workers and sales assistants plummeted across the Western world (Oesch and Piccitto 2019). Consequently, the working class’s status as the uncontested majority class, which it held over long periods of the 20th century, has come under pressure (Castel 1999) – and this decline of the working class has had major, and often underappreciated, consequences for the political, economic and social life in the Western world (Todd 2014).

In what follows, we first outline why the public debate on middle-class erosion appears muddled by inadequate concepts based on income. Clarifying the definitions of class then allows us to outline the pattern of change in the class structure over the last three decades. We show that the salaried middle class has expanded, whereas the working class has shrunk across Europe. We then discuss the implications that these shifts in the class structure have for the politics, economics and family structure of contemporary societies.

² For examples in the United States, see: New York Times, “What’s really squeezing the middle class?”, 25. 4. 2007. Financial Times, “The crisis of middle class America”, 30. 7. 2010. Wall Street Journal, “The middle class squeeze”, 25. 9. 2015. For examples in Germany, see: Spiegel, “Deutschlands Mittelschicht schrumpft dramatisch” 13. 12. 2012. Süddeutsche Zeitung, „Schrumpfende Mittelschicht: arbeite hart, aber besser geht es dir nicht“, 29. 8. 2015.

2 Getting class concepts right

2.1 The problem with income-based definitions of class

Much of the public debate on class inequalities is marked by unclear definitions and measurements of class. In the political discourse of Europe and Northern America, the term of the middle class has come to include almost everyone except the very wealthy and the poor (Cherlin 2014). The conceptual blurring of the middle class was fostered by the recent entry into the field of class analysis by economists who began to churn out studies on middle class decline, measuring the middle class as an income group.

A first income-based definition includes all those households in the middle class that earn more than the poverty line (60 to 75 of the median income) and less than twice the median income (Atkinson and Brandolini 2013, Grabka and Frick 2009, OECD 2019, Pressman 2007, Ravallion 2010). At the lower end, this means that whoever earns the minimum wage belongs to the middle class. In countries such as Chile, France, New Zealand or Slovenia, the minimum wage equals or exceeds 60 per cent of the median wage (OECD 2015: 2). Yet the minimum wage is typically paid to workers toiling in the most menial jobs as textile workers, cleaners, domestic aids or farm hands. According to these income-based definitions, either you are poor (and probably out of work) or you earn at least the minimum wage and are thus middle class.

A second definition considers the middle 60 per cent – the income percentiles 20 to 80 – as the middle class (Dallinger 2013). At the lower end, this means that all households except those living on social benefits belong to the middle class. In Europe, the proportion of the working-age population who receives benefits from either unemployment, disability, sickness or social assistance comes close to 20 per cent (OECD 2003: 175). As long as a person holds down a job – and any job –, he or she is considered to be middle class. These two definitions are not only of doubtful help for empirical analysis. Most crucially, they are also ahistorical and un-sociological as they beg the crucial question about the whereabouts of the working class.

Two additional reasons explain why occupation-based definitions of class seem preferable over income-based definition as proxies of individuals' life chances. First, household incomes and individual earnings are volatile over the life course, notably at the beginning and the end of people's working lives, and definitions of class in terms of income lead to changing class compositions (Mühlau 2014: 487). Inequalities crystallize when advantages endure over time, and the accumulation of advantages over time – people's life chances – is more strongly linked to an individual's occupation than to a single snapshot measure of earnings.³

Second, the idea of social class is to capture inequality in social relations in labour markets and workplaces, the focus thus being on inequality in human relations rather than on inequality in socially valued attributes such as income (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018: 14, Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010: 219). In this view, inequality between classes is the consequence of individuals' holding more or less advantageous positions within a society's division of labour, and these different positions go hand in hand with different opportunities and constraints. Therefore, different positions in class relations also provide incumbents with more or less power and crucially affect people's worldviews and attitudes.

³ Although note that recent research in sociology has improved the snapshot measures by using indicators of permanent income that proxy lifetime average incomes (Brady et al. 2018).

2.2 The middle class as opposed to the working class

Clearly, the widely held idea in economics that “middle class living standards begin when poverty ends” (Ravallion 2010: 446) is at odds with the Western history of industrialisation that saw the emergence in the late 19th century of large working classes in Europe and the United States (Cherlin 2014, Hobsbawm 1999, Thompson 1963). These working classes grew increasingly affluent during the post-war boom from 1950 to 1970 (Goldthorpe et al. 1969), before entering into crisis in the 1980s (Todd 2014).

Historically, the middle class was the category below the small, but powerful core of aristocrats and rentiers (who lived comfortably from their capital without having to work) and above the large masses of the labouring classes including peasants, mill workers, day labourers and domestic aides (who toiled in manual jobs and lived humbly at best), without forgetting the lower middle classes or *petite bourgeoisie*, composed of independent artisans as well as small inn and shop owners (Hobsbawm 1983: 291).

The distinction between the middle and working class is not only entrenched in everyday language, between workers and employees, blue-collar and white-collar jobs, manual and non-manual employment. It is also visible in the split between trade unions catering to white-collar employees and trade unions organizing blue-collar workers (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000) and, until recently, in separate social security systems for workers, employees and civil servants in countries such as Austria or Germany (Kocka 1981, Palier 2010). These distinctions run counter to the idea that all the non-poor belong to a single homogenous middle class.

2.3 Defining the upper, middle and working class

The criterion for membership in the upper class was initially ownership of capital and became later control of large productive assets, notably ownership of, partnership in or a commanding position within a firm, thus bringing together owners, employers, partners and senior managers. The distinction between the middle class and the upper class is ambiguous. Although the upper class has economically thrived over the last few decades, it is numerically small – a very few percent at most (Piketty 2013) – and its members often think of themselves as upper-middle class (Chauvel 2020, Hobsbawm 1995).

The difficulty of defining the middle class has led many sociologists to avoid the term altogether. Here, historians such as Eric Hobsbawm (1995, 1999) and Jürgen Kocka (1995) provide useful assistance by describing the middle class as the category of individuals who have to work for a living, but do so using intellectual rather than manual skills, typically holding occupations that require higher levels of education. Higher education provides the members of the middle class with specialized skills and expertise that make it more costly for employers to replace them. Contrary to the labouring classes, the middle class thus benefits from employment relationships that have a long-term dimension as exemplified by annual salary increments and defined careers paths (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Job stability and career opportunities, in turn, provide middle-class incumbents with a comfortable lifestyle that often includes house ownership and secure old-age pensions (Cherlin 2014) as well as the possibility to put aside savings and thus to obtain some security against life’s hazards (Piketty 2013). In a similar vein, the middle class has been described as consisting of those individuals who have enough education and income to participate fully in a country’s mainstream way of life (Wright 2009).

Below the middle class is the lower-middle class that includes white-collar employees in clerical office jobs, self-employed artisans and the *petite bourgeoisie* of small shopkeepers, innkeepers and farmers (Hobsbawm 1999: 156, Mayer 1975: 410). Historically, the lower middle class tried to keep its distance from the *working class*: the group of individuals that do not own any capital and are largely excluded from higher education (Wright 2009: 106). Notably in the United States, having no more than high-school education has been increasingly used as a marker of the working class (Case and Deaton 2020, Cherlin 2014). Being excluded from post-compulsory education leaves people with few other options

than to rely on manual labour and accept jobs that are set at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy. To the extent that members of the working class lack specialized education, they are more easily replaced in the production process and exposed to stronger employer domination than managers, professionals or technicians. As a result, they often have to contend with short-term contracts and are exposed to more frequent spells of unemployment (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992).

The core of the working class is constituted by manual workers in mining, manufacturing, construction, transports and utilities as well as domestic workers (Cherlin 2014, Todd 2014). In addition, the working class also includes many jobs in interpersonal services such as waitresses and cooks, sales assistants and nursing aides, security guards and home helpers. While historically the middle class always outnumbered the upper class, it was in turn dwarfed in numbers by the working class for long periods of the 19th and 20th century (Hobsbawm 1999). In the middle of the 20th century, Europe's middle class was still caught "between dazzling power above and massive numbers below" (Stearns 1979: 378).⁴

This discussion explains why it can be misleading to interpret job losses in occupations with median earnings as a signal of middle class erosion. In most Western countries, bricklayers and electricians, carpenters and truck drivers earn wages close to the national average. However, to the extent that these occupations formed the backbone of the working class and worker unions, few sociologists would consider them as archetypical middle-class occupations.

3 A model for today's class structure

3.1 The vertical dimension of the class schema

For analytical purposes, scholars of social stratification may wish to distinguish the employment structure at a further level of detail than simply separating the middle from the working class. One solution is to conceive the post-industrial class structure as being based on a vertical and horizontal dimension (Oesch 2006).

The vertical dimension in the class structure is uncontroversial. Most observers of social stratification distinguish the upper-section of the middle class – professionals and managers – from the lower-section, composed of semi-professionals, associate managers and technicians. A similar distinction is helpful within the working class in order to distinguish skilled occupations from low-skilled ones. While skilled working-class jobs typically require a few years of post-compulsory education – often in the form of vocational training –, low-skilled working-class occupations resemble entry-level jobs that can be mastered after a few months of on-the-job training. Among the self-employed, large employers and liberal professions (such as lawyers or medical doctors) form the backbone of the upper(-middle) class and are distinguished from the lower-middle class of small business owners, typically shopkeepers, artisans and farmers.

Regardless of whether researchers focus on more or less advantageous employment relations (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), the extent of marketable skills (Tåhlin 2007) or the volume of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979), the occupational hierarchy looks very similar because employment relations, education, skills and volume of capital are closely associated (Tåhlin 2007) – and this association explains why stratification measures are strongly correlated (Bihagen and Lambert 2018).

⁴ The class structure prior to 20th century was even more tilted towards the lower classes. The military engineer Comte de Vauban described France's social structure in 1698 as follows: "Rich: 10 per cent; very poor: 50 per cent; near beggars: 30 per cent; beggars: 10 per cent" (Cipolla 1994: 10). The polymath Francis Galton described the British class structure at the end of the 19th century as being composed, at the bottom, of about 20% criminals and paupers, followed by 20% of poor and low-paid, another 20% of the "respectable" working class, 20% of skilled workers, foremen, clerks and small tradesmen, and, at the top, 20% of independent professionals and large employers (Goldthorpe 2021: 46).

In what follows, we propose to empirically determine the vertical dimension by using an occupation's skill requirements which provides a good proxy for the degree of advantage offered in the employment relationship.

3.2 The horizontal dimension of the class schema

More controversial is a second *horizontal* dimension that distinguishes different work logics (Oesch 2006). The idea is that depending on whether an occupation involves the deployment of technical skills, the administration of organizational power, or face-to-face attendance to people's personal demands, the daily work logic differs in fundamental ways. Within the middle class, a technician, an accountant or a teacher may have similarly advantageous employment relationships and their occupation may require similar levels of education. However, the potential for the division of labour, the nature of authority relations, the ensuing primary orientations and the type of skills required vary substantially.

Schematically, it seems useful to separate four work logics: (i) the *independent* work logic of employers and the self-employed; (ii) the *technical* work logic of technical experts, technicians, craft workers and assemblers; (iii) the *organizational* work logic of managers, accountants and office clerks; (iv) the *interpersonal* service logic of socio-cultural (semi-)professionals and service workers in health care, education and social work. Within each work logic, there is a clear-cut relational hierarchy between dominant and subordinate classes. By combining four hierarchical levels with four work logics, one obtains the schema of 16 classes shown in Table 1. Depending on the empirical problem at hand, this class schema can be merged into more parsimonious versions (notably an 8-class version, see Table A.1 in the appendix). Likewise, Table 1 shows how the 16 classes collapse into four larger classes: the traditional upper-middle class, the salaried middle class, the lower-middle class and the working class.

A first advantage of horizontally differentiating the class structure is to make gender disparities visible. While the interpersonal service logic primarily offers employment to women, the technical work logic is dominated by men. Therefore, within the salaried middle class, women dominate the category of socio-cultural (semi-)professionals, whereas men represent the great majority among technical professionals and technicians. The same contrast applies to the working class, the category of interpersonal service workers being heavily female and the category of crafts and production workers being overwhelmingly male (Oesch 2006).

A second advantage is to point to differences in public and private sector employment. Public employees are heavily overrepresented in the interpersonal service logic, the welfare state being the main employer in health care, education and social services. At a similar hierarchical level,

classes thus evolve in very different job contexts. Within the salaried middle class, socio-cultural specialists are mostly employed in state-financed establishments, while managers and technical specialists mostly work for private employers. Within the working class, service workers are more likely to work in the public sector, whereas most production workers are employed by a private company (Oesch 2006).

A third advantage is to link class analysis to the growing research on occupational task structures (Autor and Handel 2013, Fernández-Macías and Hurley 2017) and to show the distinctive task profiles of classes set in different work logics. While caring, serving and teaching are dominant tasks in the interpersonal service logic, the use of information technology and machines define the technical work logic. Finally, coordinating tasks and teamwork are particularly relevant in the administrative work logic (Fernández-Macías and Bisello 2021).

Table 1: A 16-class schema based on four vertical levels of skill requirements and four horizontal types of work logics

	<i>Interpersonal service logic</i>	<i>Technical work logic</i>	<i>Organizational work logic</i>	<i>Independent work logic</i>
<i>Tertiary education</i>	Socio-cultural professionals Medical doctors Professors	Technical professionals IT-professionals Engineers	Managers Business professionals Financial managers	Liberal professionals and large employers Entrepreneurs Self-employed lawyers
<i>Post-secondary</i>	Socio-cultural semi-professionals Teachers Social Workers	Technicians Electrical technicians Draughtspersons	Associate managers Bookkeepers Tax officials	Small business owners with employees Restaurant owners Farmers
<i>Upper-secondary</i>	Skilled service workers Nursing assistants Child care assistants	Skilled craft workers Mechanics Carpenters	Skilled office clerks Secretaries Cashiers & tellers	Small business owners without employees Shop owners Hairdressers
<i>Lower secondary</i>	Low-skilled service workers Waiters Home helpers	Low-skilled production workers Assemblers Construction labourers	Low-skilled office clerks Mail sorting clerks Call centre employees	Gig workers Delivery workers Taxi drivers

Note: for each class, two typical occupations are put as examples. The coloured frames show how the 16 occupational classes collapse into 4 social classes. **Purple**: traditional upper-middle class. **Red**: salaried middle class. **Yellow**: lower-middle class. **Blue**: working class.

Finally, a fourth advantage of horizontally differentiating the class structure is to unearth differences in political attitudes. To the extent that full-time workers spend over a third of their waking hours in their job, it seems plausible that the typical demands and social interactions at the workplace – an occupation’s work logic – leave their imprint on individuals’ political outlook (Ares 2020, Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). While socio-cultural (semi-)professionals have become strong supporters of left parties, managers lean towards parties of the centre-right and, among the self-employed, small business owners disproportionately support the radical right (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

4 Shifts in Employment across classes

4.1 The working class fades from the public debate

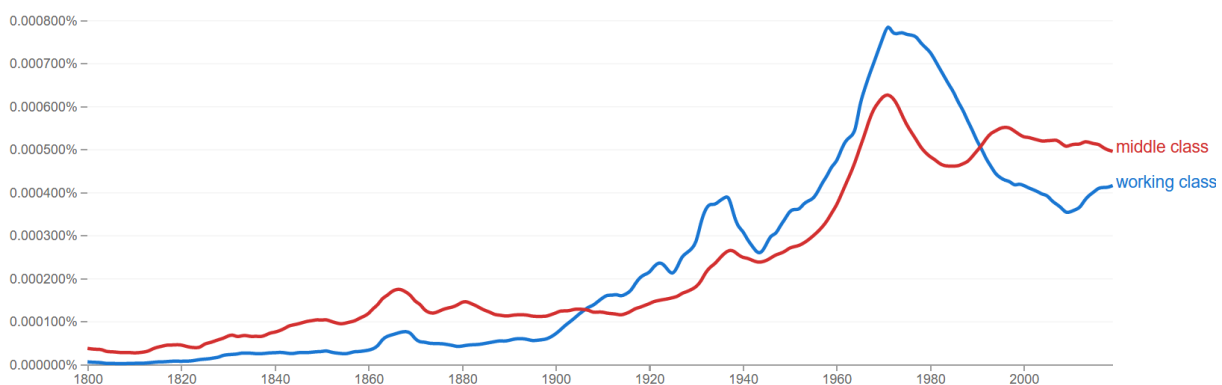
The thesis of middle-class decline does not only use flawed concepts, but also reaches empirical conclusions that seem questionable. This argument becomes clear once we return to the debate’s great absentee, the working class, which has largely disappeared from the vocabulary of politicians, journalists and public agencies as if it were pejorative (Cherlin 2014: 128).⁵ Evidence from Google’s enormous corpus of English books shows that the working class has also faded from scholarly debates over the last 50 years (see Figure 1).

⁵ An example is the OECD report “Under pressure: the squeezed middle class” (2019) which mentions the middle class over 200 times, but makes only one single reference to the working class.

In the two post-war decades after 1945, the proportion of books using the term “working class” had more than doubled, peaking in 1970. Yet with the end of the post-war boom and deindustrialization came also a steady decrease in the usage of “working class” that contrasted with the relative stability of the term “middle class”. The term “working class” had dominated large parts of the 20th century (1907-1990), but in the early 21st century the term “middle class” became more prominent again – as it had been in the 19th century, prior to large-scale industrialization.

Despite the falling prominence of working-class appeals in politics and the media, many citizens still view themselves as working class. Survey evidence on subjective class identity suggests that almost half of all Americans (Hout 2008) and more than half of all Britons (Evans and Mellons 2016) did not consider themselves as middle class in the early 21st century, but as working class. At the same time, subjective class identities strongly depend on the question wordings used in surveys.

Figure 1. Proportion of books mentioning the terms of middle class or working class



Source: Google books ngram viewer

4.2 Employment shifts across social classes

The usage of the two terms “working class” and “middle class” reflects to a large extent the trajectories of the two classes in the labour market. Table 2 illustrates the diverging destinies of the working and middle class for four European countries after 1990. Based on the European labour force survey, this table shows that in the early 1990s the middle class was still largely outnumbered by the working class in Germany and Spain – and the two large class groupings accounted for about the same proportion of the workforce in Sweden and the UK. In 1992, the middle class consisting of managers, professionals, associate managers, semi-professionals and technicians accounted for a third of the labour force in Germany and almost 40 percent in the UK and Sweden, but only for 15 per cent in Spain. By 2015, the employment share of the middle class had increased by 14 (UK) and 21 (Spain) percentage points and represented half of the workforce in Germany, Sweden and the UK, and over a third in Spain.

When horizontally disaggregating the middle class according to the work logic, we observe that all three components of the salaried middle class – managers, technical experts and socio-cultural professionals – expanded their share of total employment. While socio-cultural (semi-)professionals represent a particularly large category in Sweden, (associate) managers make up a disproportionate employment share in the UK (see Table A.1 in the appendix).

The expansion of the middle class is mirrored by the decline of the working class between 1992 and 2015. In relative terms, the working class lost most ground in Germany where it decreased from almost half to a third of the workforce. Yet the decline was also substantial in Spain, Sweden and the UK. If we distinguish, within the working class, production workers in the technical work logic (such as craft

workers, machine operators and farmhands) from service workers in the interpersonal work logic (such as waiters, sales assistants and nursing aides), we see that the drop in employment was concentrated among the former, whereas the employment share of service workers remained constant (see Table A.1 in the appendix). In Germany and Spain, production workers had made up a third of the workforce in the early 1990s, but accounted for only a fifth in the mid-2010s. By contrast, the traditional working class of production workers had already been comparatively small in Sweden and the UK in the 1990s, but further decreased over the 2000s.

In the early 1990s, about a fourth of the workforce was constituted by the lower middle class, including small business owners with and without employees as well as office clerks. The employment share of this heterogeneous class has decreased everywhere, but most clearly so in Spain where the ranks of small business owners withered over the last two decades. In the UK, the lower-middle class also lost ground, but for another reason, because technological change and offshoring reduced employment among office clerks (see Table A.1 in the appendix).

Table 2. proportion of the workforce in three social classes, 1992 and 2015 (in %)

	Germany		Spain		Sweden		UK	
	1992	2015	1992	2015	1997	2015	1992	2015
Middle class ¹	33	51	15	36	39	53	38	52
Lower middle class ²	21	18	33	23	20	13	26	20
Working class ³	46	31	52	41	41	34	36	28
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Data: European Labour Force Survey. Source: Oesch and Piccitto (2019: 459)

The analytical sample includes all workers, including employers and the self-employed, aged 20 to 64 working at least 20 hours per week in gainful employment. See Table A.1 in the appendix for more disaggregated results.

¹ The middle class includes managers, professionals, technicians, associate managers, semi-professionals and employers of 9 and more employees (and hence also the numerically small upper-class).

² The lower middle class includes office clerks as well as small business owners.

³ The working class includes craft workers, assemblers and operatives, agricultural workers as well as sales and service workers.

We can compare these proportions with the findings for the United Kingdom reported by Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2018) who use a similar class concept (the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification), but a different data source (national census data). Between 1951 and 2011, the middle class – defined as higher and lower managerial and professional occupations – increased its proportion of the workforce from 11 to 40 per cent among men, and from 8 to 30 percent among women (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2018: 36). Over the same period 1951-2011, the working class saw its share decrease from 55 to 30 per cent among men and from 50 to 35 per cent among women. These figures follow the same time trend and show similar orders of magnitude as the proportions presented in Table 2.

4.3 Middle-class expansion and occupational upgrading

The strong expansion of the managerial and professional salariat and the decline of the industrial working class was not limited to the four countries shown above. Survey evidence for France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States shows that over the 20th century, the members of every subsequent birth cohort were more likely to be employed in (upper-)middle class occupations and less likely to work in unskilled manual class positions (Breen and Müller 2020: 252).

A clear upgrading of the job structure has also been shown for France 1982-2018 (Goux and Maurin 2019) as well as for Ireland 1971-2006 and Switzerland 1970-2010 (Murphy and Oesch 2018). In the United States over the period 1980-2015, employment did not only expand among well-paid occupational groups such as professionals, managers and technicians, but also among low-paid personal service workers. By contrast, employment decreased among production workers, labourers and office clerks (Autor 2020: 114).

While the cross-national evidence is unambiguous for the salaried middle class – which experienced job growth – as well as for production workers and office clerks – which experienced job decline –, it is less clear what happened to employment in routine sales and personal services. The employment share of these occupations expanded in the United States (Autor 2020, Dwyer and Wright 2019) and United Kingdom (Goos and Manning 2007), leading to a polarized pattern of occupational change. By contrast, their proportion remained stable in many Continental European countries, leading to occupational upgrading (Fernández-Macías 2012, Fernández-Macías and Hurley 2017, Oesch 2013, Oesch and Piccitto 2019).

Occupational upgrading is closely linked to educational expansion. Over the last few decades, educational attainment rose steadily in the Western world as increasing shares of subsequent cohorts graduated from universities and technical colleges (OECD 2019). Rising educational attainment was partly a consequence of working-class decline and the decreasing availability of stable entry-level jobs in manufacturing: As demand for semi-skilled production workers dried up after the 1970s, many children of working-class families remained in school longer and obtained higher levels of education than their parents (Breen and Müller 2020). In the “race between education and technology”, the constant expansion of educational attainment was crucial to allow labour supply to keep up with skill-biased technological change and the growing demand for qualified workers (Katz and Goldin 2008).

Skill-biased technological change and educational expansion increased employment opportunities for the salaried middle class. However, they put an end to “the century of the working class” (Todd 2014) that began after 1918 and ended in the early 2000s. We wish to show that the political, economic and social consequences of working-class decline have been far-reaching.

5 Consequences of working-class decline

5.1 Political consequences of working-class decline

From the early 1900 up to the 1980s, the dominant question in European politics revolved around the place that the working class should occupy in society (Esping-Andersen 1990). In the early 21st century, this is no longer the case as the public focus has shifted to the “condition of the middle class” (Mau 2015: 2).

The changing political priorities are a direct consequence of the demographic shifts in the employment structure that were shown in Table 2 above. As technological progress and globalization gradually decimated the ranks of production workers, the working class lost its status as the uncontested majority class. After the end of the 1970s, the working class came under pressure both from below – from mass unemployment and the spread of atypical employment – and from above – from the growing ranks of professionals and managers that increasingly marginalized it within the group of wage-earners (Castel 1999).

These shifts in the job structure also weakened the traditional political allies of the working class: trade unions and social-democratic parties. Between 1980 and 2018, the proportion of wage-earners in trade unions dropped by half in the Western world as union density decreased from 52 to 23 per cent in the United Kingdom, from 35 to 17 per cent in Germany, from 22 to 10 per cent in the United States and from 19 to 9 per cent in France (OECD statistics). The only exception were Belgium and the Scandinavian countries where trade unions, bolstered by the Ghent system of unemployment

insurance, succeeded in organizing the growing numbers of workers in health, education and social welfare (Bryson et al. 2011, Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000).⁶

The changes in the employment structure also put pressure on social-democratic and labour parties (Kitschelt 1993). In Europe, they had obtained their highest electoral scores ever during the two decades of the industrial post-war boom, the 1950s and 1960s. Yet in the wake of de-industrialization and occupational upgrading, their electoral scores decreased in each subsequent decade from the 1970s to the 2010s (Dewit 2021: 10). Confronted with a shrinking working class and the uncomfortable prospect of becoming niche-parties, social-democratic and labour parties began in the 1990s to court the salaried middle class (Rennwald 2020). Clear examples were the new governments led by Tony Blair in the United Kingdom and by Gerhard Schröder in Germany that jointly pledged allegiance to a third way – to a new centre – between socialism and capitalism (Giddens 2013). They no longer emphasized the working class, “but hailed a middle class revolution”⁷ – because, as Labour’s deputy prime minister John Prescott allegedly remarked in 1997, “we’re all middle class now” (Evans and Mellon 2016: 2).

As social-democratic parties shifted their appeal from the working to the middle class and moved towards the centre on economic issues, conflict between the left and the right on economic policy diminished (Kriesi et al. 2008, Rennwald and Evans 2014). Yet as economic conflict decreased, cultural conflict over issues of community and identity – notably migration, religion and European integration – became more salient for parties and citizens. Based on a conservative stance on cultural issues, the radical right successfully attracted working-class voters who were orphaned by the social-democratic move towards the middle class and the economic centre (Betz and Meret 2012). In parallel, the left gained increasing support among the culturally liberal members of the middle-class, notably among socio-cultural professionals. The result was a fundamental realignment of class voting in Europe over the two first centuries of the 21st century (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

5.2 Economic consequences of working-class decline

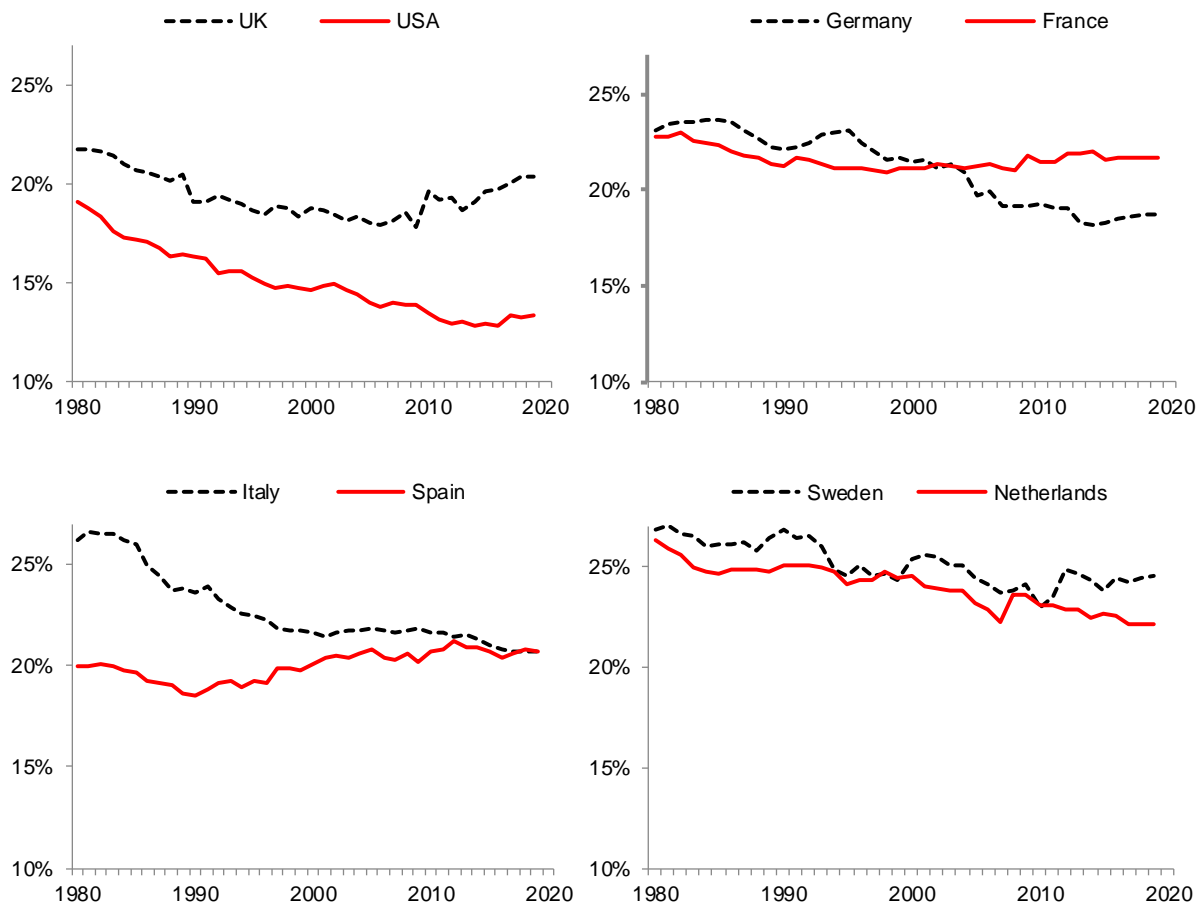
Decreasing labour demand for less educated workers and decreasing union density also weakened the economic clout of the working class. In the 1980s, the Keynesian class compromise came to an end. The almost forgotten plight of mass unemployment returned and the grand bargain of the post-war decades between workers and employers fell apart, terminating the exchange of decent wages and stable employment against hard and often dull work (Cherlin 2014, Hall 2013: 134).

In the Western World, income inequality had fallen to its lowest level of the 20th century in 1980, but began to rise again thereafter (Piketty 2019: 37). Between 1980 and 2019, the bottom half of the adult population received a declining share of national income in many Western countries (see Figure 2). Over this period, the proportion of income going to the bottom half – and thus roughly to the working class – decreased from 19 to 13 per cent in the United States, from 23 to 18 per cent in Germany and from 26 to 21 per cent in Italy. While the bottom half also lost out in France, the Netherlands and Sweden, the decline was more moderate, and in Spain and the UK the evolution was marked by trendless fluctuations.

⁶ The Ghent system of unemployment insurance turns unions into gatekeepers of the unemployment insurance and thereby creates selective incentives for union membership.

⁷ In 1999, the new Prime Minister Tony Blair invited Labour supporters to join his shift from “the old establishment to a new, larger, more meritocratic middle class” (The Guardian, “Blair hails middle class revolution”, 15. 1. 1999)

Figure 2. share of pre-tax national income going to the bottom 50% of the adult population, 1980-2019



Source: World Inequality Database <https://wid.world/>

As a result of its diminishing bargaining power, the working class did not only lose out in relative financial terms, but also treaded water in absolute terms. The evolution of median household income, corrected for inflation, gives a good idea of how living conditions evolved for “ordinary people” and notably members of the skilled working class. The median household saw its income increase, in constant prices, by only 0.3 per cent per year in the US between 1979 and 2013 and by 0.5 in Germany between 1984 and 2010 (Nolan and Thewissen 2018). Median households experienced more substantial income growth in Sweden (1.8 per cent over 1983-2013) or the UK (1.6 per cent over 1979-2013) (Nolan 2020, Nolan and Thewissen 2018). Yet overall, growth rates in median incomes were much slower than the income gains made by the working class over the previous decades. More importantly, they were also dwarfed by the income gains obtained by the top 10% and, above all, 1% in the decades after the 1980s (Piketty 2013, 2019).

The income evolution of the working class was particularly dire in the United States. Corrected for inflation, the median wages of American men have been stagnant for half a century (Case and Deaton 2020: 7). Men aged 30 with only a high-school degree earned 20 percent less in 1996 than did the same demographic group in 1979 (Cherlin 2014: 16). With the exception of the Great Depression, these working-class men were the first generation of American men to earn less than their fathers did. Over

the same period, the wage returns to tertiary education had steadily increased in the United States, driving a wedge between the earnings prospects of the working class and the upper-middle class (Autor 2014, Lleras-Muney 2017).

For the working class, the slow evolution of earnings went hand in hand with renewed fear of job loss as the spectre of mass unemployment returned in the 1980s in many countries, most forcefully so in Southern Europe. As the labour market of the working class deteriorated, many low-educated Europeans found themselves unemployed, whereas many low-educated American men withdrew from the labour market altogether, their workforce participation falling steadily over the last two decades (Case and Deaton 2017: 429).

The weaker bargaining power of the working class is not only reflected in decreasing shares of national income and stagnating real incomes. It also shows in the reduction of industrial conflict. In advanced capitalist countries, strike activity has fallen to historically low levels in the 2000s and 2010s as compared to the 1960s and 1970s (Van der Velden 2007, Vandaele 2016). The trajectory of declining strikes closely mirrors the downward trend in union density (Brandl and Traxler 2010, Kelly 2015) – and the two phenomena are unambiguous signals of the waning economic power wielded by the working class.

5.3 Cultural and social consequences of working-class decline

Over the late 20th century, the working class did not only decline as an economic and political force, but also saw its *social status* – understood as social recognition and esteem – come under threat. While class arises from the social relations of labour markets and has an objective economic basis, social status is rooted in a symbolic cultural hierarchy. It is thus based on subjective perceptions that people hold more or less reputable positions in society (Chan and Goldthorpe 2004, Gidron and Hall 2017, Weber 2005 [1922]: 683).

An influential argument holds that the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s made individuals' market success more central for social status. While the social status of professionals and managers increased, lower-skilled workers were forced to accept less secure and lower paid jobs – jobs that provided, at the same time, increasingly weak social recognition (Gidron and Hall 2017, Hall and Lamont 2013). Growing segments of the working class have thus come to believe that they obtain less than what they deserve, not only in terms of material rewards, but also in terms of social recognition (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016).

There is an ethnic and gender dimension to this argument (Gidron and Hall 2017). The fall in subjective social status may be particularly strong among white working-class men, whose rank in the status-order has been additionally challenged by women's and ethnic minorities' quest for equal rights. Ethnographic research from the United States suggests that women and minorities are seen by increasingly frustrated working-class men as "cutting in line" in the long and unsuccessful wait for economic progress (Hochschild 2016, also Cramer 2016).

Survey evidence from Europe and the United States only provides lukewarm evidence for this narrative. While unskilled workers perceive their subjective social status everywhere to be lower than that of middle-class incumbents, there is no clear downwards trend in their subjective social status over the last three decades. Unskilled workers had already been at the bottom of the status hierarchy in the early 1990s – and they were still there at the end of the 2010s (Oesch and Vigna 2021).

The consequences of working-class decline extend to family life as workers' loss of economic security may also have contributed to the unmooring of stable homes and family life. As labour market opportunities declined, the marriage markets became more difficult for lower educated men in the United States (Autor et al. 2019, Wilson 1996). An elaborate narrative of the joint erosion of workers' employment relations and family life is given by Cherlin (2014) who argues that the members of

America's working class experienced the casualization of their lives, in the sense of becoming increasingly casual, informal and unstructured – at work and at home. Not only employment contracts have become short-term and informal, providing little stability and even less long-term opportunity. The same casualization has also taken place in the realm of family, as young working-class adults shifted from marriage to less stable cohabiting unions as the context for having children (Cherlin 2014: 173).⁸

This argument is consistent with the reversal in the educational gradient of divorce. The more highly educated had been more likely to divorce over much of the 20th century when divorce was a rare and stigmatized event that required legal and financial resources. However, in the first decades of the 21st century, the lower-educated feature substantially higher divorce rates in a growing number of Western countries (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006, Kalmijn and Leopold 2021). In the United Kingdom, coming from a working-class origin was associated with lower levels of family dissolution in the cohort born between 1925-1945, whereas it greatly increased the risk for later birth cohorts. Among members of the birth cohort 1965-1979, the risk of family dissolution is almost twice as large among the offspring from low-skilled working-class parents than among the offspring from upper-middle class parents (Di Nallo and Oesch 2021). As the employment relationships of the working class have become more casual and unstable, their partnerships and family lives have also come unmoored.

The most tangible sign that the quality of life has declined for the working class comes from rising mortality rates among low-educated middle-aged whites in the United States – a rise that is mainly due to an increase in “deaths of despair”: premature deaths due to suicide, drugs and alcohol (Case and Deaton 2020). As a consequence, the life expectancy of the white working class has fallen in the United States in the early 2000s – a fall that is historically exceptional for periods without major political upheaval (Case and Deaton 2017).

6 Conclusion

Our chapter had started out by taking aim at the thesis of middle-class decline. We argued that this thesis could only be upheld if the middle class were to include, at its lower end, basically all workers except the very poor (and thus also assemblers, cleaners and construction workers) and to exclude, at its upper end, the top third of the income distribution. This would mean excluding from the middle class pharmacists and therapists, accountants and journalists, postsecondary teachers and psychologists, architects and computer programmers. Although these occupations typically belong to the top third of the earnings distribution,⁹ it seems a stretch to consider them as forming society's upper class.

Crucially, the thesis of middle-class decline only makes sense in a world without working class. To the extent that the working class represented the uncontested majority of the labour force over much of the 20th century (Crouch 1999), one can only define the middle class as some intermediate income category by completely ignoring the history of industrial society. However, once we admit the existence of a working class, labour force data make it clear that the middle class – and notably its salaried component – has not declined, but on the contrary bloomed over the last few decades. Never

⁸ Interestingly, the former Marine, Republican consultant, lawyer and investor J. D. Vance provides a similar account in his memoirs about growing up in the Ohioan Appalachians: “As the manufacturing center of the industrial Midwest has hollowed out, the white working class has lost both its economic security and the stable home and family life that comes with it” (Vance 2016: 5).

⁹ The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics provides detailed information on median wages by micro-occupations: https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm (consulted on 22. 6. 2021).

in history had so many people been working in managerial, professional and technical jobs that required higher education as at the beginning of the 21st century.

In contrast, a look at labour force surveys makes it hard to deny the decline of the working class. This decline began in the 1970s which mark both the high-point and end of the Golden age of industrial capitalism. The post-war boom from 1946 to 1973 was defined by strong economic growth, broadly shared income rises and low unemployment. After the break-down of the Bretton Woods monetary system and the two Oil crises in 1973 and 1979, the 1980s were the watershed decade when mass unemployment and wage stagnation reappeared in many Western countries (Eichengreen 2008). Together with technological change, globalisation and the neoliberal turn in economic policy, these trends heralded the demise of the working-class century (Todd 2014).

Our argument has then been that current turmoil in politics – notably the rise of the radical right – and economics – notably the increase in income inequality – is closely linked to the declining size and power of the working class. As its numbers decreased, its economic and political clout diminished, trade unions became smaller and left parties turned towards the growing salaried middle class. Weaker political allies further reduced the bargaining power of a working class which was already put under great pressure from skill-biased technological change. As a consequence, earnings no longer rose for the population's bottom half and income inequality increased in many countries, notably the United States, United Kingdom and Germany (OECD 2011, Piketty 2013, 2019). In parallel, as traditional parties were seen as no longer delivering any notable increase in the standard of living, they saw their support plummet among the working class. Instead, its members began to prefer the angry protest of the Radical right (Betz and Meret 2012).

In a nutshell, this is our thesis of working-class decline. And while we are confident that it holds, we need to admit the limitation of having only focused on the trajectories of the two largest social classes, the rising salaried middle class and the declining working class. Thereby, we have ignored two blind spots of class sociology: the small but powerful one-percent elite at the top, and the underclass of those down and out at the bottom. While the elite of top earners were forcefully put under the spotlight by political scientists (Hacker and Pierson 2010) and economists (Alvaredo et al. 2013, Piketty 2013), scholars of social stratification have struggled to integrate them into their concepts and empirical analyses (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021, Savage 2015). This is unfortunate because the salaried middle class has indisputably done well in quantitative terms as measured with the number of jobs, but less so in qualitative terms as measured with earning growth – because over the last three decades a disproportionate share of national incomes went to the top 1 percent in the Western world (Piketty 2013, 2019). While group is numerically small, it holds disproportionate power and resources (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

A second issue that we ignored and that is also mostly overlooked by survey-based class analysis concerns the very poor – the fringe of population that is largely excluded from wage labour and may thus not belong to the working class, but rather to an underclass of the truly disadvantaged (Wilson 1987). Just like for the small group of top earners, mainstream class analysis has not paid much attention to this group at the bottom of the social hierarchy. One reason is that the underclass is difficult to reach and thus often flies under the radar of survey-based research. Luckily, over the last decade, a few outstanding ethnographies have stepped in and shed light on the phenomenon in the United States, notably on underclass communities living with less than 2 dollars a day (Edin and Shaefer 2015) and on the central role played by unstable housing conditions in trapping the underclass in poverty (Desmond 2016).

These omissions suggest that there is still a lot of research to be done in class analysis. To the extent that social class does not only affect individuals' life chances, but is also a crucial constituent of their identity, it remains a central concept that provides major sociological insight.

7 References

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8 Appendix

Table A1. change in employment across classes – % of total employment in 1992 and 2015

	<i>Interpersonal service logic</i>	<i>Technical work logic</i>	<i>Organizational work logic</i>	<i>Independent work logic</i>
	Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	Technical (semi-) professionals	(Associate) managers	Liberal professionals and
Germany	10 → 12	8 → 10	13 → 23	2 → 4
Spain	7 → 11	2 → 7	4 → 15	2 → 3
Sweden ¹	15 → 15	9 → 12	14 → 23	1 → 3
UK	11 → 11	6 → 9	18 → 27	3 → 4
	Interpersonal service workers	Production workers	Office clerks	Small business owners
Germany	16 → 13	31 → 21	14 → 13	7 → 6
Spain	21 → 21	31 → 20	12 → 9	21 → 14
Sweden ¹	21 → 20	20 → 15	11 → 7	6 → 6
UK	15 → 16	21 → 12	16 → 10	10 → 10

Data: European Labour Force Survey. Source: Oesch and Piccitto (2019: 459)

¹The period under study is 1997-2015 for Sweden.

The analytical sample includes all workers, including employers and the self-employed, aged 20 to 64 working at least 20 hours per week in gainful employment. The statistical code for this class scheme is available on the author's website: <https://people.unil.ch/danieloesch/scripts/>

Reading example: in Germany, socio-cultural (semi-)professionals comprised 10% of total employment in 1992 and increased their share of total employment to 12% in 2015.

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