Class in America: Identities Blur as Economy Changes

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by Seth Freed Wessler

What class are you in?

For generations of Americans, that question was relatively easy to answer. If you owned a home, lived in it with your spouse and kids, and supported that family with a solid, well-paying job, you were a member of America's upwardly-mobile middle class. Book ending that vast middle were the upper-class elite and the proud, gritty working class.

But in recent years, especially since the Great Recession, Americans have experienced economic tumult that has rattled our class categories. Unionized industrial work is now a relic in many places, and post-recession job growth has clustered in lower-paid fields with fewer worker protections. Those at the top of the economy are becoming wealthier even as the bottom grows and the middle hollows out.

Recent polls show that Americans are now less optimistic about their children's chances to succeed than they've been for generations.

Amid this whirl of changes, NBC's In Plain Sight, a two-year project exploring poverty and inequality in the U.S., wants to know how Americans see their place in the new economic order — and what class means to them now. With the help of data visualization company Periscopic, we created an interactive quiz that asks users to rank themselves on a class scale of 1 through 10 and then compares those self-rankings to the opinions of other Americans.

The quiz results are based on extensive U.S. polling data on income, race, geography, family, health and well-being compiled by the General Social Survey.

What is class, anyway?

One lesson we learned while working on this project: Class has no one set definition and trying to define it is more complicated than you might think.

Social scientists frequently debate the meaning of class, devising their own categories based on income, employment or education level. But the truth is that class may be too complicated to reduce to a few indicators such as the size of your bank account or how many academic degrees you have, according to NBC News statistics/polling expert Josh Clinton.

"Class is also a set of ideas and beliefs," said Clinton, a political science professor at Vanderbilt University and NBC's data consultant on the Class in America quiz. "Class is perception. It's the way we think about ourselves, about how we see ourselves in comparison to others, about where we came from and where we live, as much as it is the objective indicators."

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For example, our data suggests that regardless of actual income people who make less money but feel happy are likely to think of themselves as a member of a higher class than someone who makes more money but feels generally dissatisfied.

Our sense of class is connected to our gender and race, to where we live and to who our neighbors are. It's affected by how healthy we are and even how much we pray. Class is about many facets of our dynamic lives, and we're constantly piecing together a narrative about it through shards of subjective information, expert say.

"We read people's class through how they talk, walk, how they travel, how they act, where they live," said Northwestern University sociologist Mary Patillo, who studies class and race. And we rarely connect these markers

with hard facts like annual salary, she said. "We don't say, 'I want to make $100,000 a year.' Instead we say we want to move to the suburbs."

Let's talk about class

One of the reasons Americans seem to talk around class rather than about it directly is the dramatic economic change we've experienced in recent decades.

"The class consciousness of the 1950s reflected the strength of the industrial economy," says Johns Hopkins University sociologist Andrew Cherlin, "with its manufacturing jobs that required discipline and hard physical labor. That was the heart of the blue-collar image. It was distinctive. It was highly visible. It produced high wages. Consequently, it was celebrated."

Now jobs at the Ford plant have been replaced by jobs at the burger joint. A Ph.D. no longer means lifetime employment. Home ownership has reached a 20-year low. Married parenthood that defined the middle and working class is increasingly uncommon.

But some scholars believe that Americans, still enthralled with the post-war idea of "The American Dream," have yet to update how we think about class in the face of this disruption.

"People are caught in the wave of changes without the tools to think about it, to talk about it," said Michele Lamont, a Harvard sociologist who has written on class identity in the U.S.

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And there may be some peril in our sluggishness to find ways to talk about the new economy.

"There's a danger of nostalgia that the left and right has about the economy and class identities of past generations," says Richard Reeves, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution. "We may not return to the jobs and families of the last century, and we may not want to, with the racial and gender inequality they concealed." The problem, Reeves said, is not the dismantling of old structures of class. The problem is that "we've yet to come up with institutions to replace them."

In this wave of changes, how we define class and our relationship to it is open to interpretation.

So what does class mean to you now, and how does this compare to the understanding of other Americans?

To kick start the conversation, take the quiz and share it with your friends on Facebook and Twitter. Then dig deeper into the state of class in America with reports on NBCNews.com and NBC News. And of course, let us know what you think: Find us on Facebook and on Twitter @nbcnews.