

class and race divides are even greater than in Britain.

Out of the machine age

Class is always there – it is all-pervasive but also always changing. Our current classes – working, middle and upper – originally defined along occupational lines, were born out of the machine age and in newly expanded towns and cities. We now call these “social classes” as if they were cast in stone, as if they were akin to a taxonomy of species – but they are only a very recent rank ordering and they will soon be replaced in their turn.

The older social classes (that predated our current hierarchy) we now call castes. Not long after the start of industrialisation we recognised that it was the machines that made current class systems so different from the older agricultural caste systems. As British sociologist Michael Young wrote in 1958: “The soil grows castes; the machine makes classes.”



Ella Furness

As societies industrialised, economic relationships began to be more clearly ordered, primarily around the connections between people and the machine, and between the interests of those who owned the machines and those who were forced to operate them.

Now, these classes have become untenable outside of factory town settings, or when the machines are sent abroad – when industries are moved “offshore”. Then, at home, more precarious classes emerge, and what class means and what class you are changes – because capitalism is changing.

Our social classes now are often seen as classes of free-market capitalism – but it is not the market that is important in defining them. Markets have existed for millennia, as have bosses and servants, slaves and masters. What was new was industrial capitalism – and what made that capitalism so new was its machines. Without machines being built to harness the power of carbon, initially through coal, we would not have been able to transform our world so much in such a short time, and in doing so reorder our societies so dramatically. That reordering has not ended.

As capitalism changes, so will classes

Margaret Thatcher had a valuable point to make when she wrote in 1992 that: “Class is a communist concept. It groups people as bundles, and sets them against each other.”

That doesn't mean the concept was wrong – communist concepts can sometimes be spot

on (Karl Marx very accurately described the times in which he was living) – but as capitalism changes so will classes. It was not the concept of class that set people against each other, it was being bundled into groups, largely by dint of your family's wealth, which did this. This wealth is beginning to matter more than income in the UK in determining everything from where you might live, to how you are educated. Now, the classes that best define us are changing as we change and as the political, economic and social structures that surround us change.

Machine-based capitalism, which has been around for just over half a dozen generations, appears to be slowing down. It is stunning to discover that such a short period of time has been long enough to form the bedrock of the working, middle and upper class labels we most commonly allocate each other today.

The greatest change under our current system is the class position of women. Almost everywhere in the world today, women live longer than men. Before our current class system was established this was not the case. Across Britain, and in many similar countries, young women are now far better qualified than young men. As recently as 2002 a narrow majority of the world's university students were female.

Moving out of our current class system will see a further transformation of the position of women. A decade ago it was possible to suggest that: "Women do two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property." But established gender divisions become untenable as the nature of homes change, as we have fewer children, and more of us live on our own more often and for longer.

What our current class system changes into next very much depends on what we do, or don't do. If we continue to allow the wealthiest people in our societies to hide their wealth offshore, but still partake in our society, wealth will matter more in determining class in future. Alternatively, we could introduce a basic income, as is being experimented with in Finland, or ensure less fettered access to education, as is the case in Germany. Then the divides between us could narrow and we might in future be valued more by what we contribute to society, not by how much we take out.

The cartoons in this article were drawn by Ella Furness, PhD candidate at Cardiff University and published in a recent book.



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