

Homework: Deconstructing Class

“Our class position influences how we understand the system, and it helps us all if we talk about how class works in our lives. Otherwise, it often becomes a barrier to our living and working together... One way the ruling class keeps us divided and fearful is by the social silence over class differences and the illusion that we are all just middle class.” - Paul Kivel

Capitalism keeps us confused about class and ashamed or afraid to talk about it, which invisibilizes the massive wealth disparity in this country and the systems that keep it in place. Who does that benefit? If we can't name it, talk about it, understand it, and understand how we fit into the picture and what that means, it will hinder our ability to build the multi-racial cross-class alliances and movements that we need in order to create fabulous, egalitarian social, economic and political systems.

Your homework is to use the readings and the questions below to better understand different dimensions of your own class background. We strongly encourage you to ask about actual numbers, which can be uncomfortable in some families.

Note: We know people might not have access to their families for lots of different reasons. If you don't have access to the people you lived with during most of your childhood, there are other options to explore your class background: ask a relative, family friend or anyone else who knew you as you were growing up; look at records in your town for things like education levels of your parents or the price of a home if your family owned a home; answer the family questions from what you can remember.

To ask your family:

- What was your family's income over the course of your childhood (through high school age)? How did it change? What is your parent's/guardian's average income now?
- What work did they do as you grew up and now?
- How much formal education did they get?
- Did you have healthcare growing up? Dental care?
- How often did you have to move?
- Did your family receive income-based government assistance such as welfare, medicaid, section 8 housing, SSI/disability insurance, or unemployment insurance?
- Did family separation of any kind (ie. divorce, death, abuse, imprisonment) change your access to resources?
- Was your family in debt or constantly worried about paying bills while you were growing up? What were the sources of debt (mortgage? school? healthcare? basic living expenses?)?
- Did or does your family have stocks and bonds? A home or multiple homes that they own? A business? A retirement account? How much wealth did they have from these sources when you were growing up? Now?
- Did you or your parents inherit wealth? Will you?
- How has race affected your family's experience of class?

To ask yourself:

- What is your current income level?
- Do you have debt? How much? Where did it come from? (Education, medical bills, food and rent, etc).
- Do you have savings? a retirement account? accumulated wealth like stocks, inheritance, or property? How much? Where did it come from?
- Do you financially support anyone other than yourself? Who? Did you have to work to support your family as a young person?

- Do you receive any financial support from anyone in your family? Could you if you were in an emergency? If the answer is yes to either of these, what has this made possible in your life?
- Have you ever been able to take a break from paid work? done an unpaid internship?
- How much formal education have you had?
- Do you have healthcare? Have you had it for most of your adult life?
- Has the state ever intervened in your family through Child Protective Services, policing, or imprisonment?
- How does your class impact what spaces you feel comfortable in?
- How has race affected your experience of class?
- How has gender and sexual orientation affected your experience of class?
- How have abilities/disabilities affected your experience of class?

Working Description of Class Backgrounds

- **1% ruling class, sometimes called owning class.** Control most of the nation's wealth. Have the power and influence to make most of the decisions in both the public and private sector, and generally work for shared interests to secure and increase their wealth. Perhaps needless-to-say, the vast majority are straight Christian white non-trans men. They have think tanks, advocacy organizations, corporations, foundations, lobbyists. etc. Some people in this category make all or most of their money through investments and not work.
- **Professional/managerial class:** Not the same level of resources, as the 1% but they provide the research, managerial skills, expertise, technological development to keep things running. They also manage most of the largest private, public, and non-profit organizations in this country.
- **Middle class:** More stable jobs than most people in the US. More control over hours, and work, usually have jobs with some benefits. Often own homes or have otherwise stable housing. Often higher education. No way to pay their bills without working. Slippery definition. Everyone is encouraged to think they are middle class and a recent study shows that 62% see themselves as middle class. (refer to the pyramid and how much is middle class? and also the middle class is becoming more precarious. Debt for people in this category is most often is often linked to expenses such as buying home(s), and higher education. Middle class positioning can become precarious when there are unexpected expenses such as high medical bills, loss of pensions or layoffs.
- **Working class (lots of variation here).** Often involves physical labor, service work or care work for upper and middle class people. Little control over pay, hours or access to benefits. If own a home, the majority of assets and potential for wealth are tied into it. May include calling on public (or community) safety nets to help ends meet. Often living paycheck to paycheck with little or no savings, Debt, including credit card debt, can be from any number of things including basic living expenses.
- **Impoverished Class.** People who are underpaid, underemployed, deal with chronic health issues among other things, and are systemically economically marginalized to the point of basic living expenses being unmeetable. People in this category often experience instability around housing, food, and work and are the most targeted on the pyramid for state intervention into their lives through systems like child protective services, policing, and imprisonment.