

Embourgeoisement

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Embourgeoisement can be defined as the one-way convergence of the lower social classes (working classes) toward the middle class. The term specifically applies to the postwar, postindustrial period in market and postsocialist societies.

Embourgeoisement is the process by which the middle-class, bourgeois lifestyle and individualistic and consumer values become institutionalized among the working class and peasants. The result is that more people are incorporated into a larger middle class. Working-class solidarity, loyalty to trade union membership, and class-based forms of leisure and travel weaken. They are replaced by the more pluralistic, individualistic lifestyle and values associated with the postindustrial bourgeoisie. The affluent worker replaces the impoverished proletariat. The term was coined by researchers working on the “Affluent Worker” study in England in the 1960s (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1967). In the context of an expanded welfare state, greater access to spatial mobility, the growth of non-class-based forms of leisure and entertainment, especially television, and full employment, “affluent workers” in the manufacturing and office sectors were presented as adopting the behavioral characteristics and values of the middle class.

Social mobility, from manufacturing to services, and from manual laboring to the new knowledge-based occupations, has become a characteristic of the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial society. Innovative production technologies, increased skills, and better education led to cultural changes that globalization later intensified. Working-class standards of living came closer to those of the traditional middle class as a result of better education and improved wages and jobs. Collectivist forms of leisure and entertainment began to be eroded by home-centered, privatized regimes. From the normative embourgeoisement perspective, manual workers are becoming more middle class

in their cognitive orientations. The decline of trade unionism and the rise of consumer society and identity politics destabilized traditional class divisions. The new middle class is an amalgam of social origins, ways of thinking, lifestyles, and life situations. The key features of organization and conduct are pluralism, diversity, and liberalism.

As the twentieth century came to an end, embourgeoisement seemed to dovetail with globalization. The developing world took on the mantle of agricultural supply and assembly work. The deindustrialization of western cities was presented as a temporary phenomenon. Low-income jobs in mines, on the land, and in manufacturing were meant to be replaced with new employment in the knowledge-information and communication sectors. However, the transition from low-pay to high-pay employment in the deindustrialized cities has not matched the expectations of late twentieth-century urban planners. “Interrupted embourgeoisement” was the result. By the start of the twenty-first century, in both market and socialist societies, the limitations to embourgeoisement were being recognized. Social movements to protect traditional working-class ways of life and new forms of identity politics drained the old notion of “class struggle” of salience. Addressing embourgeoisement as an essentially one-dimensional social change may be viewed as a positive illusion. In the heartlands of deindustrialized capitalism, the “left behind” became a more apparent social grouping: that is, the unemployed or low paid who manifestly lack access to and experience of the flexible, global lifestyles of the new middle class. Turning to postsocialist societies, the social capital acquired after the collapse of communism did not adequately promote upward mobility and wealth accumulation. In postsocialist societies, the lifestyles and living standards of the large-scale lower middle classes are not very different from those of the lower classes, and this is reflected in values and political behavior.

SEE ALSO: Class; Class, Perceptions of; Class, Status, and Power; Middle Class; Social Stratification

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Further Readings

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