

“American Dream”, Middle Class? What Middle Class?

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A complex class system exists in the United States, but the mass media and political rhetoric generally reduces it to three components — one middle class, and two economic generalizations — rich and the poor. Indeed the term “class” itself, as a means of defining the economic and social status of the population, has been fading away. There are, of course, a number of other classes, particularly the all-important capitalist class.

Virtually the only class ever mentioned these days is the middle class, and now that seems on the way out, at least until the next election if not longer. The New York Times reported May 12 that political candidates for election in 2016 are no longer mentioning the middle class because it may remind people that this once sacrosanct vehicle for attaining the “American Dream” seems to be falling apart and taking the dream down with it. This is indeed news, and we will get back to it.

Whatever happened to the term upper class? It’s hardly used at all these days. Gone as well is general usage of lower class, lower middle class, and upper middle class — all popular designations in the past but rare now. They may not have been scientific, but people knew what they meant.

Remember when there was a “working class” in our country? The frequent reference to this class a few decades ago has nearly vanished today, except in some academic and economic circles, a few militant unions and in the political left. The working class was split up. Its members became sold on the idea that benefits and security awaited their families in the middle class. The poor and very low-wage workers were pushed into their own weaker category, belonging neither to the working class nor middle class. One reason for this entire transformation was to suppress the memory and continuing existence of a more militant era in U.S. history when the working class and the union movement was strong and tough.

Nearly all unions now avoid mention of the working class, substituting “working families” or “employees,” but mostly the unions now identify their members as part of that all-embracing and utterly misleading ticket to paradise known as membership in the middle class. The U.S. government and the corporate elite worked together to transform a bothersome working class into a relatively placid middle class desiring to retain its new status.

It was a cunning way to disarm the working class and the union movement as well. In the U.S. today, over 60% of the work force holds the same working class jobs but in the more exalted middle class and have little say production or anything else. The wages and benefits of virtually all working class jobs have been stagnant for many years, layoffs are frequent,

joblessness is higher and the unions much weaker.

Virtually obliterated is the term “ruling class” to describe that relatively small group of billionaire and upper millionaire capitalist plutocrats, corporate leaders, bank presidents, financiers and their highly paid henchmen who possess the power to decisively influence if not totally control the political system (including elections to high office and legislation), the financial system (they largely were responsible for the Great Recession) and the functioning of Big Business of our society.

This boss of bosses in the U.S. is hiding in plain sight but its existence dare not be acknowledged because it emphatically contradicts the very essence of the democratic ideal that Washington pretends to embody. All told, according to economics professor Michael Zweig in the July-Aug. 2006 issue of Monthly Review: “The entire U.S. ruling class could fit into the seats at Yankee Stadium (capacity: 54,000).

Many of the missing class categories were subsumed into the middle class, supposedly consisting of individuals or families earning between \$35,000 and \$100,000 a year. In reality, government and business propaganda long suggested that the middle class is one big happy family earning between \$20,000 and \$200,000 annually. After that the sky was the limit for anyone who was willing to work hard. We were all in the same boat together, except those who refused to row and, of course, those who owned the boat.

This all seemed like a good deal for those who hadn’t already been tossed overboard until it was finally perceived by millions of working people during the bitter experience of the Great Recession beginning in September, 2008, that the middle class seemed to be in the process of decomposition. Government safety nets primarily served the rich, big banks and Wall Street. Six million families, often with children, were forced from their homes by foreclosures during and after the latest recession, but aside from occasional rhetoric and skimpy deeds, the Obama Administration didn’t actually give a damn. The logic of neoliberal economics dictates that such suffering by the working class leads to economic recovery in a recession.

Suddenly things got clearer for many workers: Washington’s capitalist economics and trade deals were leading to off-shoring jobs to lower wage countries, to weak unions, wage stagnation, increasing economic inequality and expanding hard times for multitudes of people.

Finally, many Americans found the target when they ingested the fact that the top 1% of the population owned 42.7% of the nation’s wealth; the next highest 19% owned 50.3%; and the bottom 80% of the entire population managed to hold on to 7% of U.S. wealth. This and other realities have aroused the consciousness of millions of people to the extent that they have come to doubt or simply disbelieve certain of the revered myths about America they were taught throughout their lives. Perhaps the most important in this regard is that membership in the middle class is a one-way ticket to economic security for themselves and their families.

Now, for the first time since the end of World War II in 1945, the corporate class has decided to downplay the importance of the middle class in the next elections, according to a New York Times article headlined, “Middle Class Is Disappearing, at Least From Vocabulary of Possible 2016 Contenders.” It reads in part:

“Hillary Rodham Clinton calls them ‘everyday Americans.’ Scott Walker prefers ‘hard-working taxpayers.’ Rand Paul says he speaks for ‘people who work for the people who own businesses.’ Bernie Sanders talks about ‘ordinary Americans.’

“The once ubiquitous term ‘middle class’ has gone conspicuously missing from the 2016 campaign trail, as candidates and their strategists grasp for new terms for an unsettled economic era. The phrase, long synonymous with the American Dream, now evokes anxiety, an uncertain future and a lifestyle that is increasingly out of reach....

“The move away from ‘middle class’ is the rhetorical result of a critical shift: After three decades of income gains favoring the highest earners and job growth being concentrated at the bottom of the pay scale, the middle has for millions of families become a precarious place to be.

“A social stratum that once signified a secure, aspirational lifestyle, with a house in the suburbs, children set to attend college, retirement savings in the bank and, maybe, an occasional trip to Disneyland now connotes fears about falling behind, sociologists, economists and political scientists say....”

This is exceptionally important. True, as the middle class and its promise of milk and honey is faltering, the politicians and those who control them will pursue other ways to manipulate and deceive the American people, but there are limitations. Great lessons have been and are continuing to be learned by the people. It’s going to take a remarkable and above all inclusive economic recovery to return to the status quo ante — and it is improbable that this will happen. The Democrats will adopt a populist pose during the 2016 elections but if they win no serious changes will transpire, based on the performance of the last three Democratic presidents.

The popularization of the idea that “We are the 99%” (in opposition to the 1% who rule America) was the best thing Occupy Wall Street did in its relatively brief existence. It was an eye-opener for so many people. It gave a concrete form to an abstract idea. So *that’s* who’s doing this to us!

It would be shortsighted in the extreme for the progressive and left movements not to follow up in a big way on the deepened consciousness of the American people about unequal distribution of wealth, Washington’s failure to protect democracy, the degeneration of the electoral process, the increasing exploitation of workers, the decline of the vaunted middle class and the extraordinary power of the 1% ruling class that controls the U.S. on behalf of a neoliberal form of warrior capitalism.

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