

Article

How the American Working Class Views the “Working Class”

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Received: 8 November 2018; Accepted: 25 February 2019; Published: 12 March 2019



Abstract: This article reviews the complications in understanding some of the conflicting tenets of American working-class ethos, especially as it unfolds in the college classroom. It asserts that the working class values modesty, straightforwardness, and hard work and has a difficult time accepting an ethos based in formal education. The article also discusses some of the performance aspects of working-class texts and explores the difficulties that outsiders face in trying to analyze/critique working-class experience.

Keywords: class; social class; working class; ethos; identity; habitus; social capital; Bourdieu

1. Introduction

If at one time American politicians and pundits deemed class irrelevant when discussing tensions within the United States, class has now emerged as a significant variable that both major parties have to account for in their strategic planning. For example, many analysts felt Donald Trump’s election to the United States’ presidency largely was due to the working-class vote, as Trump’s appeal to the Rust Belt, especially white, male workers, stole the headlines—despite that a majority of voters who earn under \$50,000 a year voted for Hillary Clinton, while a majority of those earning over \$50,000 voted for Trump (Henley 2016). In fact, only 25% of Trump voters fit the stereotype of being white, non-Hispanic, lacking a college education, and making below the median household income (Carnes and Lupu 2017). But right or wrong, the apparent values of the working class—its ethos—now play a part in the national conversation.

As a college-level educator, I welcome this conversation, as I have advocated over the years for more attention to be given to working-class issues: in my experience, the conflict between “academic values” and “working-class values” can alienate working-class students. Some of the features of their discourse style, which I align with their ethos, might appear to be anti-intellectual, resistant, or apathetic. In understanding the class differences that go into the construction of ethos, we can better learn how to approach and accommodate these students.

In this article, I examine this ethos, drawing from the scholarly conversation on the working class and rhetorical theory, but divining much from my twenty years of teaching working-class students. Thus, I call on Pierre Bourdieu and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in the same breath as I do the interactions with my students. I do not view this piece as a sociological analysis as much as I do a conversation-starter, due to how much is missing from the field of Composition Studies and Rhetoric in its discussion of the ethos of our working-class students. Still, I want to include important works that influenced my thinking. I do not wish to sentimentalize the experiences of the working class nor soften any of the rough edges to its outlook on life. Nonetheless, I associate its ethos with many positive descriptors, among them “common sense”, “humility”, and “straightforwardness”. First, I need to clarify what I mean when I speak of the working class by reviewing some important literature and showing where and how my definition diverges from those of others.

2. Who Are the Working Class?

While social class is economic at its base, the term “class” is contested (Thelin and Carter 2017). Throughout the years, class has been and still is associated with tastes, the type of labor one performs, habits, education, the extent of control people have over their labor, language, and power. Understanding it as an identity marker, then, and locating its sense of ethos provides many challenges. Its intersections with other identity markers, such as race and gender, further complicate the issue. There is also a strand of thought that suggests “working class” is not a legitimate identity marker. For example, the field of composition and rhetoric has long celebrated identity, as witnessed by the number of historically underrepresented groups of scholars given space at the national conference, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), to meet and present as special interest groups. However, at its inception and throughout its history at the conference, the working-class special interest group often had to fight off allegations that its establishment as a recognized CCCC’s group provided refuge for white academics looking to gain some sort of privilege as a marginalized group (Roepert 2011). As noted class scholar Julie Lindquist worded it, talking about the working class just pisses some people off (Lindquist 2004). Separating issues of race from class is especially problematic, as in terms of identifying behaviors, class sometimes emerges as the important variable in a pattern rather than race. Annette LaReau, for example, conducted a wide-ranging ethnography to locate the differences in child rearing among parents of different social classes. While LaReau does not discount the impact of race in parenting, her study suggests that “the biggest differences in the cultural logic of child rearing in the day-to-day behavior of children . . . were between middle-class children on the one hand (including wealthy members of the middle class) and working-class and poor children on the other” (Lareau 2011). In other words, the children she studied had much more in common with children from the same social class, whether white or black, than they did with children of the same race from a different social class. In order to continue, then, we have to grant legitimacy to class—and working class—as an identity marker that shapes experiences with the world.

This does not solve, though, the question of who we are talking about. Who are the working class, really? Michael Zweig suggests that the working class comprises the majority of society. In his updated edition of *The Working-Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret*, he estimates that 63% of the United States’ population is actually working class. He comes to this conclusion by looking at class as the “power some people have over the lives of others and the powerlessness most people experience as a result” (Zweig 2012). He differentiates among the upper classes, those who have power over the production of goods, those who have power to make laws and policies, and those who have cultural power to influence our thinking, but he blurs distinctions regarding the working class, claiming, for example, that a truck driver owning his own rig might really be in the middle class as a “small entrepreneur” as opposed to a trucker employed by a freight shipper (Zweig 2012). He sees “a degree of overlap between working-class and middle-class experience” and discusses social workers and teachers who view themselves as workers (Zweig 2012). Further, focusing on the level of independence and authority an employee has at work, Zweig believes that at least 8% of those in professional occupations are working class (Zweig 2012).

Politically and strategically, Zweig’s notions can help in identifying commonalities among workers so that the majority in the United States can understand the system that often oppresses them and fight back. But as an identity marker, the definition here causes confusion. Not only do I find the lines Zweig established that mark working class from middle class ambiguous, the umbrella fails to capture working-class culture. It elides important distinctions and might alienate those who live paycheck to paycheck in occupations associated with a degree of physical labor, as they might reject being grouped with, say, part-time university adjuncts, whose labor is even more contingent but who enjoy the comforts of working with their minds in the relative luxury of a classroom. That is not to reduce class to a category workers can choose for themselves. Rather, I seek to avoid a classification

that extends too much into middle-class culture so as to not dilute the very real values and sense of ethos that the working class embraces, whether explicitly or implicitly.

For different reasons, I am wary of encroaching upon the turf of African Americans and other ethnic or racial minorities. The dangers of possibly colonizing the experience of those among them who, economically, would be ranked in the working class loom rather large. African American scholar bell hooks explains that even though there has always been a “diverse caste and class groupings among African Americans”, most “black folks in the United States have never wanted to highlight the issue of class and class exploitation” (hooks 2000). Labeling the Civil Rights movement as a “class-based struggle”, hooks asserts that the establishment used desegregation as a “way to weaken the collective radicalization of black people” by giving only “privileged black people greater access to the existing social structure” (hooks 2000). Those who benefited from desegregation took their money out of black communities, allowing for the infiltration of the drug trade and eroding the well-being of the working-class blacks left in those communities (hooks 2000). Hooks blames “black elites” for policing the black working class and feels that the economic rise to the upper class makes them feel more allegiance to their class interests than to racial solidarity (hooks 2000). This conflict certainly sheds light on our understanding of the term “working class”, but it also shows the difficulty in trying to tease out elements that derive from the struggle for racial justice from those that might otherwise be present. So Lareau’s beliefs aside, the racial oppression that African Americans and other ethnic minorities have suffered through could be flattened out if they were specifically included unproblematically under the banner of a working-class ethos. While I suspect that some values will still ring true, these experiences deserve to be treated separately and respectfully. I will not pretend, then, that my work here encompasses the entirety of the unique elements that race and ethnicity present to the picture of working-class life.

For the purposes of this article, ultimately, I will use a narrow definition, one that acknowledges the economic threshold of \$50,000 a year for a household and, to an extent, the physicality of work, but that looks more at levels of education as the deciding factor. Since my concern is with college-level students, this focus seems appropriate to me and is supported by some of the literature in the field. Journalist Alfred Lubrano, for example, studies working-class life and isolates education as the factor that delineates the working class from the middle class. He refers to the “bridge burning” that must take place in order for a working-class individual to succeed in school (Lubrano 2004). In this respect, he is joined by Richard Rodriguez, whose memoir, however controversial in many respects, also talks about the need to withdraw from the family to achieve an education and how the emphasis on reading, so necessary for that achievement, violates a “macho code” of blue-collar workers and creates a gulf between the educated and their families (Lubrano 2004). Simply stated, the pleasures and the gains that accompany advanced literacy mark the middle class more than the actual occupation of a worker. Education creates both an aesthetic that digs beneath surface beauty and a method of thinking that seeks to question and complicate the status quo. Vocabulary increases, as do allusions to cultural history.

I want to be careful here to separate this legitimate criterion for understanding class from what Marxists refer to as “false consciousness”, which is an inaccurate mental representation of social relations that obscures the domination of upper classes over lower classes (Little 2017). People cannot remove themselves from the hardships of the class-based structure simply through education. But accompanied by a salary that exceeds the \$50,000 household median, education imprints the tastes and behaviors of what we know as middle-class culture. From my observations and what I have inferred from my students, working-class culture, in contrast, does not value formalized education nearly as much and it avoids the trappings of it that are embedded in language, abstract knowledge, subtleties, complicated analysis, and the arts. While working-class individuals tend to be problem solvers, their way of figuring things out has more to do with trial and error. I have experienced more than once workers I have hired trying to figure out a problem based on past experience rather than consulting a manual. In the classroom, I have noted what I would call resentment from my

working-class students when I have referred them to pages in a handbook in order to correct a faulty citation in an MLA works cited page. They seem to prefer to try to correct it on their own and submit it again for a thumbs up or down from me. Further, a steady pragmatism informs their actions so that the type of navel-gazing found among the middle class would strike them as odd and a waste of mental energy. Members of the working class sometimes demonstrate hostility to the airs they perceive when information from higher education appears to contradict their lifestyles or beliefs. A former student of mine, for example, refused to believe me when I talked to him about the dangers of asbestos. “My uncle worked with the stuff for years and never had any problems”, he told me. While the manner in which the information is conveyed factors into its reception, knowledge derived from “book-learning” is suspicious. Working-class individuals appear to feel that those types of theories and facts talk down to them and their experiences, as the working class historically has felt alienated from many literate practices.

This is not to say that the working class devalues smarts. They admire intelligence as much as anyone else does, but they tend to prefer it being conveyed by a person catching on or figuring things out in an activity of value to them. The deeper problem stems more from the arbitrary way that intelligence is measured in our current society and the hierarchy constructed around that measurement. Educational researcher Mike Rose’s *The Mind at Work* makes a compelling argument that what we call skills, meaning the abilities that blue-collar workers and those in the service industry use in their various occupations, actually are forms of intelligence not often acknowledged as such. Rose traces the prejudice against work that is “instrumental, applied, and practical” to ancient Greek culture, where such work was thought to have “limiting, even harmful, consequences for civic status and engagement, for the ability to deliberate and interpret ... [and] ... for virtue” (Rose 2004). In fact, as Rose’s numerous case studies show, work as varied as serving food in a restaurant to welding promotes such abilities. For the working class, intelligence and street smarts seem to be two separate processes.

Perhaps more so than with markers of other identities involving race, gender, disability, and sexuality, society expects working-class individuals to shed those markers in order to achieve status and wealth. While numerous people of color, women, the differently abled, and LGBTQ members have suffered from stereotypes involving dialect, physicality, and temperament, forcing them to code-switch and concoct other strategies to fit into the norm when opportunities occur for financial or social gain, the term “working class”, in and of itself, alludes to an established hierarchy that is often accepted, despite the obstacles it places in the path of working-class people. On the scale of social classes, working class comes below the middle and upper class, not to mention the capitalist or owning class—the less than 1% on top of the heap—who, while often thought of as upper class, really comprise a class of itself. Workers also know who falls below them. The poor and the un- or under-employed are often uncomfortably close to working class. But the American Dream measures—or perhaps judges—the working class in relation to the middle class. In it, the working class should aspire to attain middle-class standing and if they haven’t, they have failed. They have not worked hard enough or are not smart or refined enough.

Working-class individuals who do rise financially into the middle class through education are expected to embrace middle-class virtues, to not see themselves as working class anymore. Bourdieu’s theorizing on habitus, however, would suggest that the process of mimesis shapes the working class so that how they react to the world, what they value, what makes them comfortable, and how they interact with others socially has been determined (Bourdieu and Nice 1977). As sociologist Karl Maton words it, “members of the same social class by definition share structurally similar positions within society that engender structurally similar experiences of social relations, processes and structures. We are each a unique configuration of social forces, but these forces are social, so that even when we are being individual and ‘different’ we do so in socially regular ways” (Maton 2014). So while education can impact working-class individuals, changing some of their perceptions and introducing new interests, their core remains linked to their background, making them yearn for some of what they might now call “simple pleasures” and urging them to reject much of the complicated, perhaps

hypersensitive, theories and practices found in the middle class. The working class in a middle-class job lack the cultural capital to know how to socialize among those above them on the corporate ladder or to recognize the best ways to network. Alfred Lubrano suggests such practices “smack of phoniness and . . . [are] . . . antithetical” to working-class “honesty” (Lubrano 2004). Further, subtle matters—mannerisms, posture, verbal expressions, food choices—all mark a person from the working class. Working-class people cannot easily shed what they are unaware of, even if they desire to do so.

3. Ethos

For the reasons such as above, the ethos of the working class might be more apparent to those interacting with working-class people than it would be for working-class individuals to describe. Lubrano never mentions the word “ethos” in *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*, a study of what he calls “straddlers”, those working-class individuals who enter the middle class through education. Yet, much can be discerned through his discussion of blue-collar values. He lists a well-developed work ethic, respect for parents, close contact with extended family, an open manner without “messy subtext”, loyalty, solidarity, daring, basic and attractive physicality, and an “understanding and appreciation of what it takes to get somewhere in a hard world where no one gives you a break” (Lubrano 2004). These values intersect with some tenets of masculinist ideology, but overall, they coincide with traditional Americana. There’s a sense of modesty at the core. You do what you’re supposed to do and support those closest around you. Don’t be gawdy. Don’t complain if things don’t fall your way. Be straightforward and don’t make up excuses. From these values, then, an ethos can be articulated.

Ethos, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell tells us, is established when an individual “reflects the characteristics and qualities that are valued” by a given audience (Campbell and Huxman 1982). An ethos that will help persuade a working-class audience would suggest the modesty of character that is valued. J.D. Vance feels that working-class people are cynical and pessimistic (Vance 2016). While this generalization is questionable (Vance’s work has been denounced for its one-sided and negative portrayals), even if it were true, such an ethos, if reflected in speech or writing, might alienate a working-class audience. This would suggest that working-class people do not respond to assessments that reinforce negativity as much as they do an ethos that reflects a more positive view of themselves, whether the speaker is one of them or not. The working class already senses that the system is stacked against them. An individual who has charts and statistics demonstrating this might come off as a whiner—someone who has not accepted their lot in life—or perhaps as someone who might be intelligent but, again, not street savvy.

Barbara Ehrenreich, for example, wrote what, for me at the time, was a very compelling account of her going undercover into the world of low-wage work to research how people survived on meager wages. She worked as part of a maid service and as a sales clerk at Wal-Mart, among other jobs. Her conclusion strongly suggests that people cannot make ends meet on the amount of money they make and that these workers suffer so that those in the middle class and above can get labor and goods cheaply (Ehrenreich 2001). As an instructor of college composition at a state-run institution comprised mostly of first-generation college students, I thought my students would benefit from reading this type of unmasking of the capitalist system, not just as writers but as thinkers, so I was happy when her book was chosen for my university’s common reading program. I eagerly taught it in my first-year composition course.

My students, though, mostly from the working class, reacted differently to the book, pointing specifically to her persona as problematic. They cited her cynicism and cut into her credibility, what I interpreted after reading their papers as her lack of ethos. She states, for example, that her “mental guide for comportment” among her coworkers was “prison movies” (Ehrenreich 2001). She lingers on the “unwanted intimacy” at having to clean feces stains on a toilet (Ehrenreich 2001). As a Wal-Mart sales clerk, she refers to the “characteristic Wal-Martian beat-up and hopeless look” of her coworkers (Ehrenreich 2001). My students saw her as being too prissy and condescending, that she did not

understand how the real world operates. At one point, Ehrenreich develops a rash and cheats on her promise to live just as her coworkers do. She gets her dermatologist to prescribe her a cream (Ehrenreich 2001). Students cited that section over and over again as a sign that she could not hack it. Inspired by these observations, I re-read the book. Despite Ehrenreich's sympathy for low-wage workers, she compromises her ethos continuously with derisive remarks about the various situations in which she found herself that identify her as privileged. For example, she complains about the lack of comfort in the room in which she is staying during her time as a Wal-Mart worker and compares it to a "normal apartment" rather than merely to a more upscale one (Ehrenreich 2001). She comes off as brainy and skeptical, making an allusion to Sisyphus at one point for her readers, who, she assumes, will catch the reference, while her coworkers, cast in an unflattering light, probably did not (Ehrenreich 2001). My students thought she lacked humility and did not have what it takes to survive. She did not have an ethos, in other words, that the working class could value or trust.

Julie Lindquist's ethnography of a working-class bar, *A Place to Stand*, suggests something similar. One of her key informants, "Walter", talked about a working-class identity as being "hard won, not just adopted uncritically or by default" (Lindquist 2002). My students, it would seem, understood this sense of identity as being earned. As Lindquist shows throughout her study, this ethos holds a strong place in verbal arguments. Argument becomes performance. The working-class person will often refuse to qualify statements and will use any "contrasting background"—a person with a dissenting opinion or a public figure, perhaps—to promote an ethos of common sense that speaks to the "cultural truths" of listeners who they are in solidarity with (Lindquist 2002). Performance can never be exposed as mere performance—a tacit rule in the bar in which Lindquist conducts her study—as such a revelation would suggest that what masquerades as logic is actually ethos and pathos, which would damage credibility and make it seem like the person was not telling it like it is (Lindquist 2002).

Yet, while performance can work to promote solidarity, Lindquist asserts that "the decision not to perform can be read as a decision to make a 'statement'" (Lindquist 2002). In other words, outside of the gamesmanship that might take place in a bar and elsewhere to promote an ethos derived from working-class experience, "refusing to call attention to one's appeal to ethos is one way to invent a more effective persuasive ethos" (Lindquist 2002). The working-class person is, in essence, saying that everything else aside, they're telling the truth when they do not perform. That their perspective stems from practical experience is not absent in the discussion, but the responsibility shifts to the listener, who often is confronted with the choice simply to believe or not to believe—the decision is with them and the speaker does not have to say more. The truth has been presented plainly.

Working-class students in first-year writing classes might occasionally present the first form of ethos Lindquist discusses in classroom activities. One student of mine, for example, proudly identified himself as a worker and would constantly try to undermine my in-class exercises that were intended to help students learn how to critically analyze their narratives to arrive at a thesis. I usually instructed the students to reach beyond pat conclusions that were too easy and to scrutinize details to shake up clichés or aphorisms toward deeper meaning. Sometimes the activities were directly relevant to their narratives, other times indirect, but they asked students variously to dissect narratives to find key events that might not have been presented as such, to locate the assumptions under which the narrative unfolded, to look for missing details that might point to a less pat conclusion, and to examine language usage for its connotations. This student would complain that the activities were making too much out of "little things" and during the synthesis where groups shared, always was the spokesperson for his group, only to use sarcasm to undermine the findings of his group. On one particular occasion, he told the class, "I work for a living so I don't have time to search for meaning in every little thing. Life is what it is. You don't need to analyze words to try to make life something else. It just confuses things". He was relying on his notion of common sense to perform, creating an implied us and them, the "us" being the students, I believe, and the "them" being me. By invoking his identity as a worker, he very clearly contrasted his truths with what he would call the silliness of academics.

But far more common would be working-class students seeming resistance to giving details in their narratives, something I've noted through my many years of teaching, especially when compared to middle-class students. Over and over, working-class students have asked me, "Why?" when I have pointed out the need for more development of a narrative through description. While I have theorized as to the reasons for these difficulties and for the questioning that goes along with it, I'm convinced now that it aligns with Lindquist's observations about deciding not to perform. For example, I had a conference in my office with a student, as she wanted to talk to me about my comments on her paper. She specifically asked about my marginal instructions to add more detail. I told her that readers were not present when the events took place in her narrative, a story about her lying to cover up her cousin's shoplifting. "It's clear to you what happened", I said. "But readers need more information. They might have questions about what happened. They might even think you made up the story if it doesn't feel real to them". This stunned her, and I regretted saying the last part. She averted her eyes from me and looked at her paper. "But of course it happened", she said. "I just told you it did". To her and other working-class students, writing an essay was not about convincing a reader of anything. Their truth should be plain to see, and it is up to the reader to accept it or not accept it.

I will close here with one last trait, associated with the idea of earned identity and that plants the working class in a seemingly peculiar place of resenting the poor but admiring the rich. The working class has difficulty accepting handouts, and they avoid government programs unless absolutely necessary. According to Joan C. Williams, they prefer the church or family to help them out during financial difficulty, just until they got back on their feet (Williams 2017). It is difficult, then, for them to sympathize with the poor, who they perceive, rightly or wrongly, as making nearly as much as they by living off the government trough. Even if the working class wanted to accept such help, many government programs do not provide for the working class due to the caps placed on such assistance. The working class makes too much money. The ethos of working for your money is strong here. But often, they view the middle class as having broken some code in succeeding. They have devalued tradition, stability, and dependability in order to advance. Professionals often identify with their work in a way that shows class privilege. For the working class, with some exceptions, a job is what you do to support yourself, not who you are (Williams 2017). The daily contact many of the working class have with the professional middle class leaves them feeling bitter, as well. They often feel invisible or patronized (Williams 2017). Class privilege has subtly been lorded over them. Yet, since contact with the truly rich is limited, the rich become the dream to aspire to—wealth, independence, and even leisure. The rags-to-riches stories often told by the upper classes reinforce the notion that hard work, not betrayal of working values, propelled the wealthy to where they are. Throw in that the wealthy and the politicians at their behest promote tradition and family values, de-emphasize the complications of economic and global reality, and seem to speak their mind on social issues, and a discourse emerges that appears to be straight-shooting and speaks to the ethos of the working class. It, perhaps, allows for faith in difficult times, but more than anything, it validates working-class experience.

This aspect of ethos makes for a conflict that can emerge quite early, especially in the first-year writing classroom. Working-class students often write essays that criticize those who they perceive as not wanting to work. A disregard for the homeless is common. But this might be said for students from all classes, as American media has spread much disinformation on issues surrounding poverty. Therefore, I'm more interested in the subtle ways this feature of ethos presents itself. Professors like myself embody middle-class values, shown very clearly in our dialects and our aesthetics, which I think students expect. But most of us have also moved from our hometowns, both to further our education and then to find tenure-track positions. Rather than working-class students admiring the hard work and sacrifice that goes into this process, they seem to perceive it as odd, or at least at odds with their ethos. When my father died a few years ago, I had to return to California for the funeral and was gone for a week. When I returned, some of my students offered condolences, but I was surprised at some of the questions. "Why were you so far away if your dad was sick?" one student asked. Another asked, "Are you going to move back there to take care of your mother now?" I could see in their eyes

that my answers defied their truths about what adult children should do. My explanation about the reality of the job market did not sit right with them. They were presenting an ethos of tradition and family stability while I had chosen a career in a white-collar profession at the expense of those who raised me. What could they learn from this strange guy standing in front of them who did not seem to value some basic tenets of their culture?

4. Conclusions

Our awareness of working-class issues must include an understanding of ethos and how it can impact working-class students' attempts to learn in institutions of higher education. A working-class ethos is one of humility, and it is attached to a truth or a hope that still resonates with the working class. The ethos also contains elements, as I have documented, that clash with academic expectations. The very type of intelligence valued by the educated middle class is often dismissed by the working class for its lack of pragmatism or what they might call common sense. It is essential, then, to continue the efforts to make class a legitimate identity marker, one as important as race, gender, and sexuality, and to listen to students when features of this marker present themselves in the classroom or their writing.

Even when working-class students use education to advance themselves out of their social class, they still feel its tug. If we assume that a working-class ethos acts as a deficit of sorts, we will continue to alienate these types of students and others from the working class. It is important, then, to note what educators might consider the positive aspects of this ethos and to view it with sensitivity. There is a sense of dignity at the heart of working-class ethos that deserves respect. With this in mind, my hope is that this article acts as an entrance into an understudied area within Composition Studies and Rhetoric. Much more needs to be discovered about working-class ethos, especially in the ways it manifests itself in different locales and communities and in its intersections with other identity markers. It deserves our full attention.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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