



Where Are You in the Class System?

by **Paul Kivel**

OUR DISCUSSIONS OF WEALTH AND POWER are always more useful when they are grounded in an acknowledgement of our own class position and class history. Our class position influences how we understand the economic system. Our understanding will remain abstract and inaccurate if we don't talk about how class works in our own lives. Without such a grounding, class will continue to be a barrier to our living or working together to change the economic system.

Take some time to locate yourself in the wealth pyramid both in terms of your family of origin (when you were growing up) and at the present time. Use the following questions to help you think about the impact of class on your life and life opportunities. (The questions ask about the family you grew up in. Go through them a second time and ask them about your current situation).

These questions are just prompts to help you think about the impact of different economic, class, racial, and gender factors that affected where you and your parents are in the economic pyramid.

When you have thought through your answers to these questions (and any others that occur to you), talk about your responses with your family, friends, and co-workers. 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.

1. Did/do you have enough food to eat? Were there times when you or other family members were hungry? Where did your family shop? What was the basic diet? Did you eat out a lot? At what kind of places? Who cooked your meals? Was there an abundance of foods? Lots of fancy foods? How did other people in the urban/suburban/rural area you lived in eat?
2. What kind of housing did you live in? Did you have a stable home? Were you homeless? Who lived with you-- other relatives/another family? Did you rent your home? Did you ever have to move because your family couldn't pay the rent? Did your family own their own home? Did



you have your own bedroom? Did your family have a vacation place or second house? Did you feel comfortable in your house, proud of it, embarrassed by it? How much of the family's budget went towards housing expenses? Where in your area did people live with fancier homes? Where with poorer homes? Was your neighborhood racially diverse or was it segregated? How did that affect the status of the neighborhood?

3. What kind of job(s) did your parent(s) or guardians have? How steady was the work? How safe? How many hours did they work? Were there periods of involuntary unemployment? Was one income adequate for the family? Were two?

What kind of status was attached to their work? What kind of benefits? What level of income did they bring home? Did the children of the family have to contribute financially to help make ends meet? What could your family not afford on that income? Did your family go on vacations? Where did they go? Did you go to summer camps or special programs? Did your family travel out-of-state? Out of the country?

4. Did your family have any accumulated wealth like stocks and bonds, property, a business, a farm? If so, what opportunities did it provide for the family? How much wealth did the family possess? Did that increase or decrease over your lifetime? Was your family in debt, or constantly worried about paying the bills? Were there educational, employment, or housing opportunities that were not available because your family did not have enough money to take advantage of them?
5. What kind of education or educational opportunities did your parent(s) or other guardians have? How did gender or race affect that? What kinds of jobs did their education (or lack of education) make available to them or exclude them from? How did their race and gender affect that? Were they unable to pursue further education because of financial circumstances? Where did you go to school? What was the class make-up of the school? Of the surrounding schools? How were students tracked by class, race, and/or gender within your school? Where were you tracked? What were the expectations of those around you about what you would do in your life? What were the most visible career paths on those in your immediate family/extended



family/neighborhood? Was any higher education paid for by your parents or grandparents? Did you have to work to get through high school and/or college? How much education were you able to get? Did you rely on scholarships? Did you take out student loans to get through school?

6. What were activities and behaviors that were signs of different classes in your neighborhood? How were class differences in dress, language, values, background, appearance or behavior manifested in your school? How did they play out in interactions between adults? Between young people? Were you ever embarrassed by your class background? Have you ever embarrassed others, or felt the embarrassment of others because of their class background?
7. How was your class represented on TV and in the movies? How were other classes? Who were “representative” families or characters from different classes in the media?
8. Where did your family shop for food, clothes, and household goods? Did they buy “on-time” or on lay-away? Did they postpone purchases until they could afford them? Did they have to pay attention to budgeting? How was your family treated in stores based on how their class position was perceived? How did their race, gender, and/or immigrant status affect how they were treated? Were they charged more because of their race, gender, or immigrant status? Were there places they were not welcomed or mistreated? Were there places they could not afford?
9. Were your parent(s) or guardian(s) able to vote for candidates that represented their class interests? Did the local, state, and federal policies that were passed generally support the prosperity and security of your family? Were tax policies, transportation, environmental, educational, and health care policies generally to the advantage or to the disadvantage of your family?
10. Did your family have health care coverage? Was it adequate? Was your family able to have regular medical, dental, and eye checkups? Could your family afford glasses or orthodontic work/braces when needed? Did your family forego or postpone needed medical treatment because they could not afford it? Was your family ever disrespected or treated less well, or treated specially or given special



attention because of their class, race, gender, or immigrant status?

11. How did the police treat members of your family based on your family's economic standing? How was that influenced by race, gender, or immigrant status? Did your family look on the police as protecting them? As working in their interests in the community? How was the treatment of your family by other professionals affected by your family's class standing? How did race, gender, or immigrant status affect their treatment?
12. How did you and your family spend your leisure time? Did your parent(s) or guardian(s) have leisure time? How was their leisure time affected by their gender? Could they afford to buy you toys and games? What kinds of electronic items did you have in your house? What kind did you want but could not afford? Was there money to go out to eat, go to the movies, or to pay for other activities? Did your family go to fancy restaurants or eat out frequently? Did they go to expensive entertainment such as concerts or plays? Did you family go on outings or trips? Did they travel by public transportation, car, or plane? Did they stay overnight? Where did they stay? Did you have to work when going to school? Did you get paid for doing chores or jobs for your parents? Did you receive an allowance? How much was it? What did you spend it on? Were you given money on birthdays or other special occasions?

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.