
LOST IN THE STORM: THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE BLACK WORKING CLASS, 1850 TO 1990*

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Contemporary sociologists implicitly have assumed that the race-class debate has been resolved: Blacks tend to fall in one of two categories—"the black middle class" or the "truly disadvantaged." However, lost amid the controversies over the supposed privileges of the former and the problems of the latter is the plight of the "forgotten" category of blacks: the black working class. Accordingly, we present a sociological analysis of the black working class and ask: How has the black working class changed compared to its white counterpart from 1850 to 1990? Employing the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) for our analysis, we find that for the last five decades blacks are more likely to be working class than middle class or bottom class. In addition, blacks currently are more likely to be working class than are whites. In fact, in recent decades the percentage of blacks who are working class exceeds those for whites and, indeed, are higher than ever recorded for whites.

For two decades, sociologists have framed the debate about the relative impact of race and class in terms of a dichotomy. Primarily as a response to Wilson's (1980) seminal book, *The Declining Significance of Race*, an impressive body of work has fallen on one side of the argument (Wilson 1987) or the other (Cancio, Evans, and Maume, 1996; Farley and Allen 1987; Feagin 1991; Horton 1992; Jargowsky 1996; Jaynes and Williams 1989; Taylor 1998). However, lost in the storm of controversy over the nature of

change in the black population is the plight of the black working class. Accordingly, we present a sociological analysis of the black working class and ask: How has the black working class changed relative to its white counterpart from 1850 to 1990?

RACE AND THE WORKING CLASS

The black working class has not been given much consideration in sociological research in recent years. Perhaps the primary reason for this omission has been the emphasis on the black middle class and the disadvantaged (Collins 1989; Duncan 1968; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Landry 1987). However, the issue of social class generally has long been a topic in sociology (Blau and Duncan 1967). Much of the work on class has centered on the operationalization of the concept. For instance, Vanneman and Pampel (1977) argue that class should be operationalized as a categorical rather than a continuous variable because of the bounded nature of the concept. Kluegel, Singleton, and Starnes (1977) argue for multiple subjective indicators of class. Wright and Cho (1992) maintain that

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class should be based on a combination of Marxist notions of property relations and Weberian ideas on friendship patterns. Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi (1992) call for a public-perception approach to social class. Brooks and Manza (1997) follow a hierarchical, multicategory conceptualization. Indeed, it is not uncommon for sociologists to use education, income, or occupation to function separately as de facto measures of class (Cancio et al. 1996; Jargowsky 1996; Wilson 1980). Finally, the most enduring operationalization of class is Duncan's (1961) socioeconomic index based on subjective rankings of education, occupation, and income.

Yet, none of the above studies or conceptualizations has been specifically designed to incorporate the unique history of the black working class. Landry (1987) noted that the black social class structure was substantially different from that for whites because of racial discrimination. In fact, for some time after Emancipation, social class in the black community was determined by skin color (Landry 1987). Moreover, some evidence suggests that skin color continues to be a significant prestige factor among blacks (Keith and Herring 1991).

Nevertheless, the issues of race and class have been dominated by the declining-significance-of-race thesis (Wilson 1980). This thesis has led researchers to overlook the continued significance of the black working class (Cancio et al. 1996; Wilson 1987). This is ironic given the historic role that the black working class has played in the development and survival of the black community (Dennis and Kahl 1987; Harris 1982). Higgs (1977) notes the struggles of the black working class in the face of competition and discrimination from whites—poor and non-poor whites alike. Starobin (1970) highlights the legacy of slavery and its impact on the development of the black working class. In fact, he notes that black workers at one period were preferred over white workers because of their stronger work ethic. Morris (1984) notes the critical role that the black working class played in the civil rights movement. Whereas the leaders of the movement may have been overwhelmingly middle class, the majority of the “foot soldiers” were from the working class.

In this study, we revisit the issue of the black working class. However, our research differs from prior work in an important aspect: We attempt to *empirically* document changes in the black working class from 1850 to 1990. This category of the black population is important because of its relative size (Dennis and Kahl 1987): If the majority of blacks in America are working class, why does most sociological research focus on issues of relevance to the black middle class and the disadvantaged? Thus, the contribution of this research to the literature on race and class is to *redirect* sociological research toward the black working class. The first step toward this new focus is to gain an understanding of how this group has increased in size over the twentieth century—the most dramatic century of social change in America's history (Lieberson 1980; Massey and Denton 1993; Tolnay 1997).

DATA

The data employed for this study are the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). The IPUMS consists of 25 precision samples drawn from 13 U.S. censuses covering the years 1850 to 1990. Created by the University of Minnesota's Historical Census Project (Ruggles, Hacker, and Sobek 1995), these data permit analyses of detailed household and personal characteristics of the U.S. population over a 140-year period. Hence, the IPUMS represents the richest source of data currently available in the United States on the general population.

Our analysis is restricted to occupational-based class differences between blacks and whites and employs data from available years of the IPUMS. Each sample is large, ranging from 16,974 in 1860 to 1,401,751 in 1990 (see Appendix A for details).

To analyze changes in occupational distributions over time we use the IPUMS variable, *occupational income score*. This score enhances comparability of occupational data across all years contained in the IPUMS. The occupations are based on the 1950 standardized classification system. The 1950 census is used by IPUMS as the baseline because it is structured in a way that is similar to the pre- and post-1950 censuses.

The *occupational income score* is a continuous measure representing the economic value of a specific occupation. Ruggles et al. (1995) calculate this score by taking the median income value by sex—based upon total income—for each occupation. Then a weighted average is taken of the two medians, and a score is assigned. (For further details on this measure, see Ruggles et al. 1995.)

According to Ruggles et al. (1995), the occupational income score has an advantage over the Duncan socioeconomic index because it is based on an objective value rather than on subjectively determined prestige. This is important because subjective measures have been found to work differently for blacks and whites (Kluegel et al. 1977). Moreover, the score combines the strengths of the two primary traditions of the sociological study of class: The use of continuous and categorical measures (Vanneman and Pampel 1977; Wright and Cho 1992). To our knowledge, this is the first study of race and class to employ this new measure.

In this study, we take advantage of the fact that the occupational income score represents different levels of the occupational income structure. We create a three-category dependent variable with the following labels: middle class, working class, and bottom class. To create this class measure, we first use the mean occupational income score from the 1950 census baseline. The mean score in 1950 is 23.9 (S.D. = 10.4). We then calculate the mean for each of the 10 broad occupational categories (e.g., professionals, clerical workers, laborers, etc.) for all available years. If the category-specific mean occupational income score is one standard deviation or more greater than the 1950 mean occupational income score, then persons in that occupational category are assigned to the middle class; persons falling one standard deviation or more below the mean are assigned to the bottom class;¹ all others are defined as the working class.²

¹ The term *bottom class* was employed by Evans et al. (1992) in describing stratification systems in a cross-national analysis of perceptions of social class. In this study we limit our use of the term to that category that falls below the working class, as measured by the occupational income score.

² We tested the validity of our three-category

In terms of race, only whites and non-Hispanic blacks are included in this analysis, primarily because other racial and ethnic groups are not identifiable in all years in the current version of the IPUMS.

Persons 16 years and older are included in this study. This criterion was employed because IPUMS designates this as the population that is legally allowed to work. Moreover, this criterion allows for comparability in the age structure of the work force over the 140-year period. That is, prior to the modern era, the work force was younger on average. Another advantage of this criterion is that it accommodates the fact that the non-middle-class work force tends to be younger.

Relatively few women are represented in the 1850 and 1860 samples because at that time the role of housewife was not considered to be an occupation. Also, evidence suggests that errors in census coverage prior to 1860 led to a substantial undercounting of black women (Curry 1981). Therefore, in 1850 only 500 women are included in the analysis—21 black women and 479 white women. Similarly, only 2,070 women (200 black women and 1,870 white women) appear in the analysis for 1860. As a result, there are no black women in the middle-class category for the years 1850 and 1860.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents occupation-based distributions by class, for both sexes combined, for blacks and whites for each census year, 1850–1990. Note that the 1850 and 1860 samples include only those blacks who were free prior to Emancipation. Nevertheless, patterns for the entire 140-year period are discernible.

social class variable by cross-tabulating over 10 broad occupational categories for four selected years. The validity test revealed that in 1850 99.97 percent of laborers were found in the working class category. In 1880, 1940, and 1990 the percentages of laborers in our working class category were 99.94, 99.32, and 96.03 respectively. These results lend confidence to the validity of our class measure. Persons who are not in the labor force are excluded from this analysis; the unemployed *are* included. However, because the occupational income score is calculated based on median income, including the unemployed has little effect on our measure of social class.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution by Class Category and Race: U.S. Population, 1850 to 1990

Census Year	Middle Class			Working Class			Bottom Class		
	Black	White	Black/White Ratio	Black	White	Black/White Ratio	Black	White	Black/White Ratio
1850 ^a	1.4	7.1	.19	68.9	40.9	1.68	29.8	51.9	.57
1860 ^a	1.0	8.0	.13	39.4	38.0	1.04	59.6	54.0	1.10
1870	.4	8.7	.05	18.6	39.2	.47	81.1	52.1	1.56
1880	.6	9.0	.06	30.0	41.8	.72	69.4	49.2	1.41
1900	1.0	11.7	.08	29.0	47.2	.62	70.0	41.1	1.70
1910	1.6	14.7	.11	25.9	49.4	.52	72.5	35.9	2.02
1920	1.8	16.0	.11	37.0	56.1	.66	61.2	27.9	2.19
1940	2.2	16.1	.13	42.9	62.3	.69	54.9	21.7	2.54
1950	3.3	19.3	.17	55.4	63.4	.87	41.3	17.3	2.39
1960	3.0	17.5	.17	58.0	68.1	.85	39.0	14.5	2.70
1970	4.7	17.4	.27	71.3	70.7	1.01	24.0	11.9	2.02
1980	8.9	20.6	.43	76.5	69.7	1.10	14.7	9.7	1.51
1990	11.5	23.2	.50	77.7	68.4	1.14	10.9	8.4	1.29

^aData for 1850 and 1860 represent only those blacks who were free prior to Emancipation.

In the pre-Emancipation years, the middle classes of both races are exceptionally small: The black middle class is less than 2 percent of the total black population, while approximately 7 percent of whites are middle class. This reflects the state of mid-nineteenth century United States. Industrialization and the ascension of the middle class did not occur until the turn of the century. However, what is surprising are the racial differences in the other class categories. First, the percentage of whites in the bottom class category in 1850 exceeds that for blacks (51.9 percent compared to 29.8 percent). Second, a higher percentage of blacks in 1850 is working class (68.9 percent versus 40.9 percent for whites). This is a revelation given that blacks who were free before Emancipation were only “quasi-free” (Franklin and Moss 1994).

After Emancipation, different patterns emerge for blacks. The black middle class remains the smallest of the three classes until 1990, the final year of the analysis, ranging from less than 2 percent in 1850 to approximately 9 percent in 1980. This category does not exceed 10 percent until 1990. Thus, despite researchers’ emphasis on this group, the data show that the black middle class has yet to reach 12 percent of the total black

population. And, while in 1990 the black middle class is slightly larger than the black bottom class, at no point in history does the percentage of blacks in the middle class equal the comparable white percentage. In fact, the percentage of blacks in the middle class in 1990 is approximately the same as the percentage of whites in the middle class in 1900—nearly a century earlier.

An examination of post-Emancipation patterns for the bottom class also provides important insights into the level and extent of change experienced by blacks. In 1870, most blacks and whites are bottom class. The bottom black class remains the largest class until 1940. The surge in the relative size of the black bottom class after Emancipation is not surprising. Many former slaves faced severe economic conditions. Coupled with the resurgence and reestablishment of white supremacy in the South, the educational, employment, and economic prospects for freedpersons were meager at best. Also, the period of legal segregation immediately following Reconstruction—the Jim Crow era—was not officially abolished until the mid-1960s. Undoubtedly, this larger percentage in the bottom class for blacks compared with whites is primarily a result of these structural factors.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution by Class Category and Race: Men Only, 1850 to 1990

Census Year	Middle Class			Working Class			Bottom Class		
	Black	White	Black/White Ratio	Black	White	Black/White Ratio	Black	White	Black/White Ratio
1850 ^a	1.4	7.2	.19	69.4	41.0	1.69	29.2	51.8	.56
1860 ^a	1.5	8.8	.17	56.1	39.7	1.41	42.4	51.5	.82
1870	.5	9.5	.05	24.5	40.3	.61	75.1	50.2	1.50
1880	.7	9.9	.07	35.9	42.9	.85	63.3	47.5	1.33
1900	1.3	13.3	.10	38.8	48.9	.79	59.9	37.8	1.59
1910	2.3	17.2	.13	39.0	49.5	.79	58.7	33.3	1.76
1920	2.4	18.8	.13	48.1	53.0	.91	49.5	28.3	1.75
1940	2.8	19.3	.14	55.2	59.2	.93	42.1	21.6	1.95
1950	4.1	23.8	.17	66.7	58.6	1.14	29.2	17.6	1.66
1960	4.3	25.5	.17	74.6	61.0	1.22	21.2	13.5	1.57
1970	6.9	25.9	.26	78.7	63.4	1.24	14.5	10.7	1.36
1980	11.4	27.8	.41	78.2	64.4	1.22	10.4	7.8	1.34
1990	13.2	28.8	.46	77.9	64.5	1.21	8.9	6.7	1.33

^aData for 1850 and 1860 represent only those blacks who were free prior to Emancipation.

However, the greatest change occurs in the working-class category. While blacks currently are more likely to be working class than are whites, this was not always the case. The black working class reaches an all-time low in 1870—less than one in five blacks is working class. But by 1880, the black working class includes three out of ten blacks, and by 1950, the majority of blacks are working class. By 1970, the percentage of working-class blacks matches that for whites for the first time in 110 years, and by 1990 the percent working-class among blacks exceeds its white counterpart by nearly 10 percentage points. Indeed, over the last three decades, the percentage of blacks who are working-class is higher than the percentage ever attained by whites.

Table 2, which presents occupation-based class distributions by race for men, echoes the overall patterns for the total population. These data show that few black men are in the middle class. This category includes less than 2 percent of black men in the pre-Emancipation years, and the percentage changes little over the next 100 years. The percentage of white men in the middle class increases over the period, ranging from 7 percent in 1850 to 29 percent in 1990. Black men experience significant post-1960 in-

creases in the middle-class category, reaching 13 percent in 1990, a level that white males already had reached in 1900.

Patterns for the bottom-class category resemble those for blacks generally. In 1870, the first census year after Emancipation, the percentage of black men in the bottom class exceeds that for their white counterparts. This surge in bottom-class black males probably reflects the freeing of slaves in the 1860s. This pattern of higher percentages of black males in the bottom class relative to those for whites persists for the next 120 years. The bottom class remains the largest category for black men until 1940.

In 1870, after the Emancipation, the percentage of white men in the bottom class peaks. Beginning in 1880, however, the percentages for both races steadily decrease: In 1880 the percentage in the bottom class is 63 for black men and 48 for white men, but by 1990, these percentages reach single digits for both races.

From the standpoint of the sociology of race and class, the most revealing patterns for males take place in the working-class category. Beginning in the post-Emancipation period, the percent working-class among black men is lower than that for white men for the next 70 years. Then, in 1950, the pat-

Table 3. Percentage Distribution by Class Category and Race: Women Only, 1850 to 1990

Census Year	Middle Class			Working Class			Bottom Class		
	Black	White	Black/White Ratio	Black	White	Black/White Ratio	Black	White	Black/White Ratio
1850 ^a	—	4.4	—	42.9	28.4	1.51	57.1	67.2	.85
1860 ^a	—	2.0	—	6.0	24.4	.25	94.0	73.6	1.28
1870	.2	2.0	.08	4.3	30.2	.14	95.6	67.7	1.41
1880	.6	9.0	.06	30.0	41.8	.72	69.4	49.2	1.41
1900	.3	4.0	.07	9.0	38.8	.23	90.7	57.2	1.59
1910	.4	3.3	.13	5.2	49.2	.11	94.4	47.5	1.99
1920	.6	4.0	.14	13.7	69.7	.20	85.7	26.3	3.27
1940	1.1	5.5	.20	18.4	72.6	.25	80.5	21.9	3.68
1950	1.9	7.0	.27	34.2	76.5	.45	63.9	16.4	3.89
1960	1.5	5.7	.26	38.7	78.4	.49	59.9	15.9	3.78
1970	2.4	6.5	.36	63.6	80.3	.79	34.1	13.2	2.58
1980	6.4	11.6	.55	74.7	76.3	.98	18.9	12.1	1.56
1990	9.9	16.8	.59	77.4	72.9	1.06	12.7	10.3	1.23

^a Data for 1850 and 1860 represent only those blacks who were free prior to Emancipation.

tern reverses. From 1950 to 1990 the percent working-class for black men exceed those for white men. In fact, in 1970 the percent working class for black men exceeds that for white men by 15 percentage points, the largest difference since Emancipation. Finally, by 1990 the percentage of black men in the working class is 77.9, compared with 64.5 percent for white men.

Table 3 presents distributions by class for black women and white women. The trends for black women differ distinctly from those for black men and for the total black population. The percentages of black women in the middle-class category are extremely low. Between 1870 and 1920, the percent middle class for black women stayed below 1 percent, reaches 1 percent in 1940, and by 1990 is the highest in history—9.9 percent. Despite substantial gains, black women have yet to gain relative parity with white women in the middle class.

Some illuminating trends are revealed when comparing black women and white women in the bottom class. At the beginning of the post-Emancipation era in 1870, the percentages in the bottom class for both races are high. Both percentages decrease in 1880, but the pattern of higher percentages in the bottom class for black women persists.

While this trend continues through 1990, there are some interesting shifts along the way. For instance, in 1910 the percentages in the bottom class show a dramatic increase for black women and a substantial decrease for white women. The percentage increases by 25 points for black women in the bottom class between 1880 and 1910. In fact, the 94.4 percent for black women in 1910 is comparable to their level in this category for 1870. In short, the gains for black women in the bottom class in 1880 had been erased within 20 years.

There are fluctuations in the size of the bottom class for both groups of women between 1870 and 1910, but the most dramatic difference begins in 1920, when the percent bottom class for black women is more than three times that for white women. This ratio increases until 1970 when it declines to 2.58. A dramatic decrease in the percentage of black women who are bottom class occurs in 1980. Finally, in 1990, the ratio decreases to its lowest level in 130 years, with the percent bottom class for black women at 12.7 percent and at 10.3 percent for white women. Considering that at the beginning of the century more than 9 out of 10 black women were bottom class, this may be the most dramatic improvement in social status in their history to date.

The percent working class for black women and white women over time reveals substantially different patterns when compared with those for black men and white men. Black women experience major shifts in their class distributions. In 1870, the percent working-class for black women is 4.3 percent. The percentage increases sharply to 30.0 percent in 1880, but in 1900 the percentage drops to 9.0 percent, and to 5.2 percent in 1910. In contrast, the percent working class for white females over this period is relatively stable.

Beginning in 1920 there is a steady and consistent increase in the percent working class for black women. By 1950, the patterns for black women and white women diverge when the percent working class for black women nearly doubles. A modest increase in 1960 in percent working class for black women is followed by dramatic improvements in 1970, 1980, and 1990. Over the same period, the percent working class for white women decreases slightly. Finally, the percent working class for black women exceeds that for white women for the first time in 1990—in that year, 77.4 percent of all black women have working-class status.

A supplementary multinomial logistic regression analysis revealed essentially the same patterns as those described (results available from the authors on request).

CONCLUSION

We have compared the changes in the black working class from 1850 to 1990 with those of its white counterpart. Our findings reveal a complex and interesting story of race and class in America. In 1850, only free blacks were counted by the census. Free blacks were approximately one-tenth the number of enslaved blacks and were severely limited in their civil rights. Yet they were not the most disadvantaged free population in the United States—that distinction was held by whites. At that time, blacks were actually more likely to be working class than were whites. In fact, nearly 70 percent of the total black (free) population was working class in that year. This pattern changed dramatically with subsequent post-Emancipation censuses as former slaves were included in the black population counts. This increased the per-

centage of blacks in the bottom class. In addition, the black middle class is minuscule for most of the 140-year period studied—only within the last two decades has it grown to a double-digit percentage.

Contrary to the foci of sociologists over the last two decades, however, the most compelling story of race and class is the dramatic reemergence of the working class as the modal category for blacks. This growth is so substantial that today, when compared with whites, a higher percentage of blacks is found in the working class. This increase in the black working class is accompanied by a dramatic decline in the percentage of bottom-class blacks. And while much of the increase in the percent working class for blacks has occurred since 1960, most of the increase occurred from 1870 to 1950 (i.e., prior to the civil rights movement). While the civil rights movement was not irrelevant to the growth of the black working class, it could be argued that the civil rights movement sustained, if not accelerated, a trend that was already well under way. An equally valid interpretation is that the civil rights movement was instrumental in increasing the comparatively small black middle class in the face of a separate trend toward growth in the black working class.

Regardless, the trend by race and class becomes muddled when the issue of gender is added. The percent working class for black men experienced dramatic gains over the 140-year period studied. In fact, the percent working class for black men has been higher than that for white men since 1950. Once again, most of the growth in this category occurred before the civil rights years. And, as is the case for the total black population, the increase in the percentage of working-class black males comes as a result of an impressive decline in the percentage of black men in the bottom class.

For black women, the change is not as sustained but is no less dramatic. For most of America's history, the overwhelming percentage of black women have been bottom class. In fact, black women appear to have benefited the most from the civil rights movement. In 1950, 63.9 percent of black women were bottom class compared to 16.4 percent of white women. By 1990, those figures are 12.7 percent and 10.3 percent,

respectively. In short, black women are more likely to be in the bottom class than are their white counterparts, and this pattern has been consistent since 1860. Nevertheless, since 1970, the majority of black women were found in the working class. And like their male counterparts, black women exceed white women in this category for 1990.

We see several implications of these findings. First, scholars who argue for the inclusion of gender as an important element in discussions of race and class, rather than simply including gender as one of many control variables, will find support in these results. More research should focus on black women and the unique economic barriers they face. Importantly, the fact that black women had a higher percentage in the working class than did white women in 1990 does not necessarily imply a trend. Clearly, a better understanding of the inhibiting processes (e.g., patterns of race and gender-based occupational segregation) must be gained to explain why black women continue to face double jeopardy with respect to class in the United States.

Another implication of these findings is that researchers must focus on the black working class itself. Clearly, this is the largest, more enduring, and most important social class category for blacks in the United States. In fact, questions concerning the socioeconomic advancement of this large minority population are still relevant at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In the face of the social changes that America is undergoing, does a disproportionately working-class black population hinder further strides toward racial equality? The answer is not so obvious. Contrary to broadly held sociological opinion, the relative size of a population's working class might be the clearest standard of economic viability: A sizable working class is certainly preferable to one that is majority bottom class. Consequently, does the black working class provide a necessary intermediate step toward racial equality in America? Perhaps. Yet any answer to this question must be provided by future studies.

In conclusion, the sociological study of race and class has correctly addressed the issue of the growth of the black middle class

and the existence of the truly disadvantaged in the United States. But, lost in the storm of the race-class controversy over the last two decades has been the vitality and importance of the black working class. We hope that, as a result of this study, more sociologists will be drawn to this group of blacks as a focal point of their future research.

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Appendix A: Sample Sizes for the IPUMS Data

Year	Total	Black	White
1850	52,510	963	51,547
1860	16,974	599	16,375
1870	27,638	6,416	21,222
1880	165,335	23,827	141,508
1900	36,177	4,491	31,686
1910	143,914	18,365	125,579
1920	199,028	22,597	176,431
1940	522,595	52,912	469,683
1950	677,059	66,709	610,350
1960	855,476	79,422	776,054
1970	1,069,742	103,924	965,818
1980	1,216,618	128,570	1,088,048
1990	1,401,751	156,153	1,245,598

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