

Stuck in the middle with you

Our confusing discussions of class in America.

By Tamar Jacoby, February 9, 2015



Are you middle class? Upper middle class, maybe? Do you think you and your family are the people being talked about when politicians debate solutions for the middle class and its problems?

It's a premise rooted in the very heart of the American project: that everyone is or can be middle class. So when Obama uses the presidential bully pulpit – starting but not ending with the State of the Union – to focus the nation on the plight of the middle class, he knows the theme will resonate, big time.

But who exactly is he talking about? It was hard to tell from the speech. Sprinkled among the paragraphs about the middle class, there were also references to “working families.” If you dig a little deeper into the policies proposed in the address, it turns out several are designed for people with low to moderate incomes. But when Obama went on the road to elaborate on his proposals and presumably meet some middle-class Americans, he ended up in a café in Baltimore that serves vegan sandwiches and charges almost five dollars for a chai latte – not exactly working-family fare.

The SOTU poster couple – Rebekah Erlar, who sat in the gallery with Michelle Obama, and her husband Ben – was even more ambiguous. The president made it sound as if they might be working class: Ben was in the construction business before he lost his job, Rebekah attended community college. But it turns out the speech glossed over a lot about the Erlars, and not just that Rebekah had worked as a volunteer for Patty Murray, the Democratic senator from Washington. She also has a four-year college degree – putting her squarely in the solid middle class, not the lower or precarious middle where Obama seemed to want to situate her.

There are several possible explanations for the president's loose language. It's hard to believe it's just carelessness, or ignorance. He and his speechwriters can't live such sheltered lives that they really don't know the difference between college-educated professionals and blue-collar workers. So perhaps the vagueness is a political calculation. Maybe Obama is deliberately using the catch-all term *middle class* to create a sense of solidarity and spur concern for people at risk of slipping out of the middle into what once might have been called the working poor. Sounds well-intentioned. But is it really helpful? Surely the worst thing we could do for this group is to fail to see them for who they are and misdiagnose their problems. That does no service to working families – and it obscures the choices we face as a nation.

The truth about class in America is complex and hard to get at. Partly, we just don't like to talk about class. It's something we feel our ancestors left behind, and happily so, in the old, unequal, stratified societies they left to come to America. When we finally do get to the conversation, it's often muddy and misleading. Economists, sociologists, and public opinion all use different definitions and different yardsticks. Is the key variable income, education, occupation – or is what really matters what you think you are? Many studies rely solely on self-identification. And it's easy to fall back on the view Obama tapped in his speech: that except for small, distinct strata at the top and the bottom – the very rich and the chronic poor – we're all pretty similar in aspirations and values.

The data tells a different story. Economists divide American households into five income brackets, or quintiles, each containing exactly one-fifth of the population. In 2013, the lowest fifth earned less than \$20,900, the top fifth more than \$105,900. A catch-all definition like Obama's puts everyone in between in the middle class. But it's hard to view that as a meaningful category – an earnings gap that wide makes for differences in the kind, not just the degree, of opportunities open to you and your family. Using all five tiers allows social scientists to distinguish between an upper-middle, a lower-middle and a truly middle category: households making roughly \$40,000 to \$60,000 in 2013.

Public opinion falls somewhere in between the nuanced and unnuanced views. Perhaps, in a loose sense, all Americans consider themselves middle class. But when put on the spot by pollsters, people can and do make distinctions. According to a 2012 Gallup poll, some 55 percent of Americans see themselves in the middle or upper-middle class, while roughly a third call themselves working class and 10 percent put themselves in the bottom tier. Self-identification shifts with the business cycle. But unlike Obama, most Americans distinguish between the middle class, the very poor, and a somewhat shadowy group in between.

One of the reasons for our confusion: The lower middle class has all but disappeared from American politics. Sometimes, like Obama, we lump these families with the tier above. Other, equally misleading analyses group them with the chronic poor. In fact, they are much more likely than people in the bottom fifth to have graduated from high school, twice as likely to be married, more than twice as likely to work full-time, and dramatically less

likely to rely on public assistance. *Working class* has a dated, leftist ring. But what's stunning is that we have no term to replace it. The old industrial factories where this tier once worked may be shutting down, but the people haven't gone up in smoke.

Which brings us back to the State of the Union. Middle-class people down on their luck – people like Rebekah Erler – sometimes appear to fall into this forgotten lower tier. She herself told the president that “everyone that we are surrounded by is blue-collar, dealing with the [exact] same” problems she and her husband are dealing with. But the truth is most of her problems are different – and not just in degree. That's not to say her concerns don't matter, or that politics shouldn't address them. But surely what she needs is not the same as that of a young person who doesn't have a four-year degree and has scant hope of obtaining one, who owns nothing but, at best, a bank account and has no middle-class parents to fall back on. The biggest difference between the working poor and the middle class is not their incomes, which may go up and down, as the Eblers' did, but their social capital, or connections, and kinds of opportunities they have.

Conventional wisdom tells us this is the next big thing – that politicians on the left and right are going to spend the next two years talking about the middle class, or whoever it is we mean when we say *middle class*. The State of the Union tells us that conversation needs to start with some tough-minded questions. Who exactly are we talking about? What are the challenges they're facing? Truth is we don't really know – about either the middle class or the working poor. And that's before we even get to the hard questions: what society owes either group, and how best to provide it.

Obama wants to use the plight of the poor to expand what we promise the middle class – universal child care, for example. Republicans aren't buying that – it's a nonstarter. But the GOP still needs to face up to the questions that Obama and other Democrats have been papering over. And it's about time – both the middle class and the working poor need better answers.

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