

The Bourgeoisie

Bourgeoisie was originally the name for the inhabitants of walled towns in medieval France; as artisans and craftsmen, the bourgeoisie occupied a socioeconomic position between the peasants and the landlords in the countryside. The term was extended to include the middle class of France and subsequently of other nations. The word *bourgeois* has also long been used to imply an outlook associated with materialism, narrowness, and lack of culture : these characteristics were early satirized by Moliere and have continued to be a subject of literary analysis.

The bourgeoisie as a historical phenomenon did not begin to emerge until the development of medieval cities as centers for trade and commerce in Central and Western Europe, beginning in the 11th cent. The bourgeoisie, or merchants and artisans, began to organize themselves into corporations as a result of their conflict with the landed proprietors. At the end of the Middle Ages, under the early national monarchies in Western Europe, the bourgeoisie found it in their interests to support the throne against the feudal disorder of competing local authorities. In England and the Netherlands, the bourgeoisie was the driving force in uprooting feudalism in the late 16th and early 17th cent.

In the 17th and 18th cent., the bourgeoisie supported principles of constitutionality and natural right, against the claims of divine right and against the privileges held by nobles and prelates. The English, American, and French revolutions derived partly from the desire of the bourgeoisie to rid itself of feudal trammels and royal encroachments on personal liberty and on the rights of trade and property. In the 19th cent., the bourgeoisie, triumphantly propounding liberalism, gained political rights as well as religious and civil liberties. Thus modern Western society, in its political and also in its cultural aspects, owes much to bourgeois activities and philosophy.

Subsequent to the Industrial Revolution, the class greatly expanded, and differences within it became more distinct, notably between the high bourgeois (industrialists and

bankers) and the petty bourgeois (tradesmen and white-collar workers). By the end of the 19th cent., the capitalists (the original bourgeois) tended to be associated with a widened upper class, while the spread of technology and technical occupations was opening the bourgeoisie to entry from below.

Within Karl Marx's theory of class struggle, the bourgeoisie plays a significant role. By overthrowing the feudal system it is seen as an originally progressive force that later becomes a reactionary force as it tries to prevent the ascendancy of the proletariat (wage earners) in order to maintain its own position of predominance. Some writers argue that Marx's theory fails because he did not foresee the rise of a new, expanded middle class of professionals and managers, which, although they are wage earners, do not fit easily into his definition of the proletariat.