

# INEQUALITY AND STRATIFICATION

Race, Class, and Gender

Robert A. Rothman

### THIRD EDITION

# INEQUALITY AND STRATIFICATION

Race, Class, and Gender

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University of Delaware

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## **Preface**

When the first edition of this book appeared late in the 1970s, reviewers noted that it was unusual to devote systematic attention to minorities and gender in analyzing the structure and dynamics of class systems. This more inclusive approach has come to dominate the social sciences in the intervening years and has stimulated a reconsideration of the nature of social inequality and generated a large body of new scrutiny of the interaction among class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Moreover, dramatic social and economic change is reshaping contemporary industrial stratification systems. These developments mandate a third edition that incorporates the most recent work in the field. Therefore, theory and research of the 1990s prevails over older material outdated by events.

There are also several organizational changes designed to improve the flow and coverage of the subject. Part One provides a broad overview and introduction to the field. Part Two is an expanded discussion of the evolution and institutionalization of industrial class systems. The three chapters that focus on the basic elements of inequality—economics, prestige, politics—define Part Three. Part Four includes separate chapters on life chances and lifestyles as well as class consciousness. Social mobility is the subject of Part Five. Although the American experience remains the central emphasis of the book, the scope has been broadened to include more attention to other industrial systems of social stratification.

#### xii Preface

One thing that has not changed is the central pedagogical thrust. This edition, like earlier ones, is written with the undergraduate student in mind. It is intended to provide the fundamentals of social stratification for undergraduates in a concise and readable format. One new feature is that *Key Concepts* are highlighted with boldface in the text and listed at the end of chapters to facilitate review. Consequently, this book may be used in different ways: as a basic text for stratification courses; or in newer sociology courses that focus on the intersection of class, race, and gender; courses in stratification; or as one component of courses such as introduction to sociology, social problems, race and minorities, or gender studies. The concise format makes it convenient to combine it with any of several useful anthologies.

Any book that attempts to lay out the fundamentals of an area as complex and broad as stratification cannot elaborate all the areas of debate and controversy. Therefore, more advanced students are directed to the material contained in footnotes and annotated Suggested Reading sections for the resources needed to explore these issues in more depth and detail.

This project has benefited from the ideas and comments of numerous friends and colleagues, but especially Nancy Horak Randall, Wingate University, and Michelle A. Smith, Kent State University. Stacy Osnick helped with the research, and Sharon Chambliss and Rob DeGeorge at Prentice Hall guided the manuscript through the production process. The entire effort was sustained by the unflagging support of my wife, Nancy.

# **Contents**

PREFACE		хi
	NATURE OF INEQUALITY STRATIFICATION	1
CHAPTER ONE	STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION	2
The Structure of Inequal Social Stratification, 4 Class, Race and Ethnicit The Institutionalization of Class and Life Chances, Conclusion: The Intersect Key Concepts, 17 Suggested Reading, 17	y, and Gender, 5 of Inequality, 11	
CHAPTER TWO	THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL STRATIFICATION	18
Three Theoretical Tradit The Marxian Tradition,	estation or agreement of the contract of the c	

The Weberian Tradition, 26

The Structural Functional Tradition, 29 Conclusion: Occupation and Class, 32 Key Concepts, 33 Suggested Reading, 33	
PART TWO STRATIFICATION IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES 3	34
CHAPTER THREE INDUSTRIAL CLASS SYSTEMS 3	5
The Industrial Transformation, 35 A Five-Class Model, 43 Conclusion: Reshaping the Class Structure, 49 Key Concepts, 51 Suggested Reading, 52	
CHAPTER FOUR INSTITUTIONALIZING AND LEGITIMIZING STRATIFICATION 5	3
The Origins and Maintenance of Stratification Systems, 53 The American Dream and the Ideology of Individualism, 55 Race, Ethnicity, and Stratification, 61 Gender and Stratification, 69 Conclusion: American Dilemmas, 78 Key Concepts, 79 Suggested Reading, 79	
PART THREE PATTERNS OF INEQUALITY 8	80
CHAPTER FIVE THE DYNAMICS OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY 8	31
The Distribution of Wealth and Poverty, 81 Annual Incomes, 82 Net Worth: Measuring Household Assets, 89 Poverty, 90 Homelessness: Life on the Streets, 97 Widening the Gap between Rich and Poor, 100 Conclusion: Favoring Greater Equality, 100 Key Concepts, 101 Suggested Reading, 102	

CHAPTER SIX	SOCIAL EVALUATIONS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS	103
Class and Social Judgr Social Class and Socia Occupational Prestige, Class, Race, and Socia Class and Character Ju Conclusion: Class and Key Concepts, 122 Suggested Reading, 12	ll Status, 104 107 Il Relationships, 112 Idgments, 120 Self-Esteem, 121	
CHAPTER SEVE	EN THE SHAPE OF POLITICAL POWER AND INFLUENCE	123
The Elite: Patterns of I	e-Collar Political Activity, 131 articipation, 133 Sphere, 135 ical Sphere, 140 Alienation, 141	
	XPERIENCING SOCIAL TRATIFICATION	144
CHAPTER EIGH	T CLASS AND LIFE CHANCES	145
The Concept of Life C and the Poor Get J. A Stratified Health Ca Conclusion: Environm Key Concepts, 156 Suggested Reading, 15	ail: The Criminal Justice System, 147 are System, 151 mental Justice, 155	
CHAPTER NINE	CLASS AND LIFESTYLES	157
The Concept of Lifesty The Capitalist Elite, 1: The Institutional Elite, The Upper Middle Cla	58 , 160	

Contents

The Poor, 167

The Lower Middle Class, 163 The Working Class, 165

Conclusion: Hunger in the World, Hunger in America, 170

Key Concepts, 170 Suggested Readings, 171	
CHAPTER TEN CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS	172
Subjective Perceptions of Inequality and Stratification, 172 Class Awareness, 174 Class Identification, 175 Class Solidarity, 177 Class Action, 178 Class Consciousness and the Working Class, 180 Family, Gender, and Class Consciousness, 182 Conclusion: Factors Mitigating against Class Consciousness, 184 Key Concepts, 186 Suggested Reading, 186	
PART FIVE INHERITANCE AND MOBILITY	187
CHAPTER ELEVEN PATTERNS OF SOCIAL	
MOBILITY	188
	188
MOBILITY  Social Mobility: Open and Closed Systems, 188  Intergenerational Mobility, 191  Class, Race, Gender, and Higher Education, 195  Discrimination in Hiring, 204  Downward Mobility, 204  Conclusion: Independent Businesses and the American Dream, 207  Key Concepts, 208	188 210
MOBILITY  Social Mobility: Open and Closed Systems, 188 Intergenerational Mobility, 191 Class, Race, Gender, and Higher Education, 195 Discrimination in Hiring, 204 Downward Mobility, 204 Conclusion: Independent Businesses and the American Dream, 207 Key Concepts, 208 Suggested Reading, 209	

### **PART ONE**

# The Nature of Inequality and Stratification

Industrial societies are divided into social classes based on position in an economic system of production and distribution, and occupation is the best single measure of social class position. Some of the most significant rewards and opportunities for people are shaped by social class position. The implications of class are most pronounced in the distribution of earnings and wealth, social judgments and evaluations, and access to political power but extend to most facets of modern life, including matters of life and death. The system of classes and the distribution of inequalities are supported and maintained by the culture and social structure of the society. Chapter 1 develops the basic ideas and concepts that are central to the sociological analysis of inequality and stratification. Chapter 2 reviews three major theoretical conceptualizations and interpretations of the origins of class systems that inform current theory and research.

# CHAPTER ONE Structural Inequality and Social Stratification

#### THE STRUCTURE OF INEQUALITY

Inequality is readily evident in the contemporary world. Discrepancies—sometimes vast discrepancies—in wealth, material possessions, power and authority, prestige, access to simple creature comforts, and the way people are perceived and treated dominate the social life of contemporary societies. There are many forms of inequality, but sociologists tend to focus on three major forms—economic, social status, and power and authority—following the lead of the German sociologist Max Weber. At the extremes are the homeless and the super-rich, the esteemed and the degraded, the powerful and the powerless, and there are many levels between them.

#### **Economic Inequalities**

Disparities in wealth and material resources are usually the most visible form of inequality. Industrial societies contain millions of people whose daily lives are a struggle against economic hardship. Hundreds of thousands of the destitute are homeless, compelled to wander the streets and fill the shelters in Los Angeles, London, and Moscow. One child in ten lives in poverty in the major industrial nations—Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Israel, and Italy (Pear, 1996). In America, it is one child in five. An even greater proportion lack health insurance. According to one study, about

2

one child in three in the United States during 1995–96 was without insurance for at least one month, and 3.5 million (five percent) were without protection for the entire period (Bacon, 1997).

While many struggle for survival, others in the same society enjoy great wealth. Professional athletes, entertainers, and corporate executives earn incomes of millions of dollars. Others, fortunate enough to have been born into prosperous families with names such as duPont or Rockefeller or Walton (Wal-Mart), never need to worry about the source of their next meal or confront the fear of being unable to pay the rent. On the contrary, some indulge in ostentatious and extravagant lifestyles. Wealthy tobacco heiress Doris Duke, for example, always felt it necessary to fly her two pet camels with her on her trips to Hawaii (Clancy, 1988). Ranged between such extremes are smaller gradations of monetary inequality, often measured by the size of homes in which people live, the kind of cars they drive, or the quality of the schools their children can afford to attend.

#### Social Status

A second important form of inequality is social status. **Social status** is the social standing, esteem, respect, or prestige that positions command from other members of society. It is a judgment of the relative ranking of individuals and groups on scales of social superiority and inferiority. Social status is relevant because people are sensitive to the evaluations of others, valuing the admiration and approval of their peers, as is readily evident when people attempt to enhance their social standing through the public display of clothing, jewelry, cars, and homes, or by their choice of careers and lifestyles.

Individuals may earn social status on the basis of their own efforts (athletic ability) or personal attributes (physical attractiveness, intelligence), but there is also a powerful structural dimension to social status—occupations, social classes, racial and ethnic groups, and the sexes are ranked relative to one another. For example, at various times and in various places, women and men have formed clearly demarcated status groups. In the United States, as recently as the 1950s, it was common for males to be openly rated as superior to females by both men and women (McKee & Sherriffs, 1957). Occupational prestige rankings are probably the status hierarchies with which most people are familiar. Occupations around the world are typically arranged on a strict hierarchy of prestige, with physicians and lawyers and scientists usually found at the top and garbage collectors and janitors near the bottom. This ranking holds true for societies as diverse as China (Fredrickson, Lin & Xing, 1992), Czechoslovakia (Penn, 1975) and the United States (Bose & Rossi, 1983).

The significance of social ranking extends beyond questions of social approval and ego gratification. Status considerations can dictate the form of social interaction between people at different levels. People are likely to show deference to those ranked above them and tend to expect deference from those below them. Social ranking can also lead to practices designed to limit social contacts and social interaction that show up in residential segregation and other forms of exclusionary behavior.

#### **Power and Authority**

There is a third salient, more complex form of inequality, dealing with the unequal distribution of power and authority in society. Although there is a lack of consensus on precise definitions of such terms, there is agreement that the essence of **power** is the ability to control events or determine the behavior of others in the face of resistance and to resist attempts at control by others. **Authority** refers to a specific form of control where the right to command is considered as appropriate and legitimate. Authority may be based on tradition or may reside in organizational position (as generals' right to direct the behavior of lieutenants, or supervisors' ability to sanction workers) or in expert knowledge (physicians' right to prescribe the actions of patients) (Weber, 1947).

Discrepancies in power are difficult to document, but it is clear that enormous power is concentrated in the hands of the people who direct the large organizations that dominate the political, military, corporate, and social landscape. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) was among the first to point out that the growth of massive organizations, during the twentieth century, consolidated unusual amounts of power in governmental offices such as the President of the United States and cabinet officers, military leaders such as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, corporate CEOs, church leaders, and university presidents. In contrast, a majority of Americans feel quite powerless politically, feeling they have little or no influence over the activities of the government, and four out of five believe the government is run by special interests (Apple, 1995).

### SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The terms **social stratification** and **stratification system** focus on the societal context of inequality. Social stratification envisions societies as divided into a hierarchy of levels or layers of individuals and families in which the distribution of rewards is linked to hierarchical position, *and* the values, beliefs, laws, and ideologies that serve to support and maintain the distribution of inequality. Attention to the idea of a system is an important component of social stratification because the various dimensions are interrelated and mutually supportive. Social and cultural ideas explain and legitimize the division of society into levels and the distribution of rewards, and the patterns of inequality confirm the legitimacy of the values. Powerful nations have, for example, enslaved other groups as a source of cheap labor and rationalized their actions on the grounds that the victims were somehow inferior populations.

Social stratification has taken many forms in different places and at different points in history, but the three most familiar forms are slave, caste, and class systems. Slave systems divide people into two fundamental groups, the free and the unfree. Despite a great deal of progress in the area of human rights, some forms of slavery survive in a number of places around the globe such as Mauritania (Masland et al., 1992). Caste systems organize people into fixed hereditary groups in which there is little or no chance for children to escape the caste of their parents. Caste systems have existed at various times in Rwanda (East Africa), Swat (Pakistan), Japan, Tibet, Korea,

and India (Berriman, 1973). The Hindu caste system was in place as early as the ninth century and prevailed until the nineteenth century. The British began to formally dismantle the system at that point, but vestiges remain in many rural areas (Beteille, 1992). Class systems are the product of industrialization, where major social and economic rewards are determined by position in the economic system of production, distribution, and consumption. Each type arises under different historical conditions, identifies distinctive social categories of people, generates alternative kinds of hierarchies, and differs in the scope and magnitude of inequalities.

#### CLASS, RACE AND ETHNICITY, AND GENDER

Class, race and ethnicity, and gender are sometimes approached as distinct and separate social categories and sources of inequality in contemporary society. However, they are best understood as overlapping or intersecting bases of inequality and stratification in what has been called a **matrix of domination** (Andersen & Collins, 1992). None can be fully understood or explained without analyzing the interrelationships among them. For example, the experiences of middle-class African-American women must be approached as the convergence of class, race, and gender. Therefore, each of the concepts requires clarification.

#### Social Class

A social class (or simply class) is a group of individuals or families who occupy a similar position in the economic system of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services in industrial societies. For the overwhelming majority of people social class position is defined by occupation. Social class position is much more complex than jobs, but work is the most useful starting point. People's work sets effective limits on financial rewards and social status, influences the stability of employment and the chances for social mobility, locates them in systems of workplace authority and power that have consequences that extend beyond the workplace, defines some features of social relations on and off the job, contributes to the way people think about themselves and others, and has enduring implications for their children.

Many of the problems of the poorest members of society can be traced to their tenuous link to the economic system. The unemployed and the working poor form a large pool of people lacking a secure position in the workplace. They are handicapped

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Sociologists are unable to agree upon a single definition of the term *social class*, in large part because meanings vary with ideology and methodology. Classes are often defined as "groups with roughly similar earnings." However, this measure is inconsistent with the usage here, because earnings are determined by class position. Alternatively, educational levels are sometimes used to identify classes, but educational credentials are better understood as one of the key factors in opening or limiting access to structural position. In some places in the text, income or education is used to identify classes, because that was the approach used by the authors of the study being cited.

by a lack of experience, weak educational credentials, a lack of job opportunities, discrimination, or personal habits. Whatever the combination of reasons that explains the plight of specific individuals, their collective impoverishment has its origins in an economic system that is unable to provide jobs at decent wages for all who want them.

One of the issues that divide sociologists is the problem of distinguishing the number and form of classes in contemporary industrial societies. Despite some areas of ambiguity and the lack of clear boundaries between class levels, American society can conveniently be divided into five broad social classes. At the top of the stratification system is a small "elite class" that wields unusual economic, political, and social power. The elite is actually composed of two analytically separate groups, an "institutional elite" that directs the dominant national organizations and institutions (government, business and industry, the media, education, and religion), and a "capitalist elite" made up of individuals and families whose power derives from wealth and property. In some instances the wealth of the capitalist class has been passed down through several generations in families such as the Mars candy family and the Heinz food family, while others have amassed fortunes in their own lives, as is the case of Bill Gates of Microsoft. Specific individuals may, obviously, simultaneously be members of both groups as is illustrated by the members of the Kennedy and Bush families whose careers in politics were built upon inherited wealth.

The next level, the "upper middle class," combines occupations based on expert knowledge (professional people such as physicians and scientific personnel) and administrators and managers below the executive level. The "lower middle class" includes technicians, lower-level administrators, and most clerical and sales personnel. In the United States the term "working class" means manual work, also called blue-collar work, and describes those who do the physical labor in the factories, mills, and mines. Some are engaged in highly skilled work (auto mechanics) while others do more routine work on assembly lines, and skill differentials are an important consideration in understanding how manual workers perceive themselves. At the bottom of the hierarchy are "the poor," who live on the very margins of the productive system. Numbered in this class are both the "working poor," who fill the least skilled jobs in the economy, and those caught up in unstable and poorly paid jobs (the unemployed, under-employed, and discouraged because they believe they cannot find work).

Developing an accurate picture of the class structure of American society is a complex and controversial task, but one model is suggested by Exhibit 1.1. The elite is small, comprising no more than one or two percent of the population. About one-quarter of the society can be defined as upper middle class on the basis of administrative, managerial, and professional occupations. One-third of the population hold lower-middle-class jobs in clerical, sales, and administrative support positions, and another one-quarter fill the manual occupations of the working class. Perhaps one in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>There is one school of thought that argues that discrete classes have been eroded by the social and economic forces of post-modern society (Block 1992). The case for the persistence of classes is given by Hout, Brooks, & Manza (1993).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>The composition of classes is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

**EXHIBIT 1.1 A Simplified Model of Social Classes** 

SOCIAL CLASS	PERCENT OF THE POPULATION	NUMBER EMPLOYED
Elite	1–2%	
Upper middle class Professionals Managerial	25–30%	18,752,000 17,746,000
Lower middle class Sales workers Technicians Clerical	25–30%	15,404,000 3,926,000 18,353,000
Working class Craft workers Operatives Transportation workers Protective services	20–25%	13,587,000 7,874,000 5,302,000 2,187,000
The poor Service workers Domestic workers Unskilled workers Farm workers Unemployed	20–25%	14,186,000 804,000 5,021,000 1,889,000 7,000,000

Note: Class designations are based on standard occupational categories employed by the Bureau of the Census. The unemployed are estimated at five percent of the workforce.

Source: Employment and Earnings. 1997 "Employed Civilians by Detailed Occupation, Employment and Earnings," 61 (January, 1997), Table 12, page 177.

four Americans may be counted among the poor, holding marginal jobs or facing unemployment.

#### **Race and Ethnicity**

Members of racial and ethnic groups are, to quote a widely used phrase, clusters of people who, "because of physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment" (Wirth, 1945: 347). Several different collective terms are used to describe these groups in a society. Sociologists originally introduced the phrase **minority group** to emphasize power differentials that maintain their subordination by the majority. Some contemporary analysts prefer terms such as "dominant" and "subordinate groups" because they more clearly emphasize power differentials. Other analysts favor the phrase "people of color." **Race** is a social construction typically based on visible physical characteristics such as skin color, stature, and facial features. **Ethnic groups** are identified by cultural (or national) origins, which may be manifested in language, religion, values, beliefs, or customs and practices.

8

The bringing together of peoples of diverse cultural or racial origins does not necessarily produce social, economic, or political subordination. A case in point is the Cossacks and Tungas of Manchuria, who coexisted for centuries within a context of political independence and mutual respect (Lindgren, 1938). Switzerland has since 1815 been a nation with three official names and languages, Schweiz (German), Suisse (French), and Svizzera (Italian), where members of these three groups peacefully coexist. Unfortunately, conflict or some form of economic or social exploitation is a more common outcome of the meeting of groups than is peaceful coexistence. The former Yugoslavia is, for example, wracked with ethnic hostility.

New groups enter societies by different paths, and each route has important implications for subsequent intergroup relations. Immigration is the flow of peoples in search of religious or political freedom or economic opportunities. The immigration of non-English ethnic groups, to the United States, began on a large scale in the 1840s and continues today, as waves of newcomers pour into America. In Europe, the 1990s witnessed a massive movement of people in response to the dissolution of the communist block and civil wars, producing some unrest and the tightening of immigration policies in some western European nations. Groups are sometimes explicitly recruited to provide specific kinds of labor (contract labor). Chinese laborers, for example, were recruited to help build the U.S. railroad system during the 1850s.

Immigration and contract labor tends to be a more or less voluntary process, but there are also involuntary contracts. Peoples are sometimes forcibly incorporated into a new nation as a result of territorial expansion. More powerful groups pursuing military, economic, or political goals encroach on previously independent populations, as was the experience with Europeans encountering Native Americans, and relegate them to the lower levels of the stratification system. In the most extreme cases subjugated groups are enslaved to fill the need for cheap labor. Slaves may also be imported for the express purpose of providing cheap labor or other duties.

#### Racial and Ethnic Groups in the United States

American society is a mosaic of peoples of diverse racial and ethnic origins. Natives (or their descendants) of at least 150 different countries and 557 Native American tribes live in the United States. Typically, the government gathers data for five major racial and ethnic groups, African American, Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, and white. The combined population of the four nonwhite groups was 64 million in 1992 (O'Hare, 1992). Each of these groups has an extended history in America, and the language used to identify each group hints at the social and political realities of their histories. In each case, there is some disagreement over self-identification among members of these groups(Exhibit 1.2).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Census Bureau enumeration of membership in racial and ethnic categories is based on self-identification by respondents, and thus is subject to variation over time. Moreover, people of multiracial background must often choose a single designation. Residents will, in the 2000 census, for the first time have the opportunity to elect more than one category. The issue of multiracial identification is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.