

SEVENTH EDITION

Social Stratification and Inequality

CLASS CONFLICT IN HISTORICAL, COMPARATIVE, AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE



Harold R. Kerbo

Seventh Edition

Social Stratification and Inequality

*Class Conflict in Historical, Comparative,
and Global Perspective*

Harold R. Kerbo

*California Polytechnic State University
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For Kathy, Nicole, and Emily

Preface

Since the early 1980s, when the first edition of this book was published, income inequality in the United States has grown every year without letup. The United States, in fact, moved from an average level of income inequality in the 1960s compared to other industrial nations to the position of highest income inequality by the early 1980s. "Lean production," cost-cutting, and ever lower wages and benefits paid by American corporations kept alive the trend toward increasing inequality for the 1990s. Along with the lowest unemployment in many decades, the late 1990s brought some slight relief to the lowest income groups in the United States, although overall income inequality continued to increase. What must be stressed is that with the lowest rate of unemployment in many decades and the longest running economic expansion in U.S. history during the 1990s, there continued to be much more poverty in the United States than in almost all other industrial nations, even among many people working full-time. With the economic downturn from 2001, however, the small gains in income made by low-income and poor Americans were quickly lost. The "economic recovery" that followed in 2002 was one of continued inequality, lower wages, and reduced benefits. Up to 2004 this economic recovery was the longest in American history with a *net loss of jobs*. Only small gains were made between 2004 and 2006. "Outsourcing" has sent expected new jobs to low-wage countries. Something has significantly changed with respect to the nature of social stratification in the United States in recent years to make these things possible. Workers in other countries, as already noted in previous editions of this book, continue to be worried that they may suffer the same fate as their corporate elites attempt to keep up with cost-cutting American corporations.

As was noted in the previous editions of this book, my primary task has been to provide an up-to-date, comprehensive examination of social stratification in human societies. The focus is on social stratification in the United States and what is happening in this country today. However, extensive historical and comparative information has been included to help us better understand the rest of the world, as well as the United States today. As Seymour Martin Lipset (1996:17) put it, "Those who know only one country know no country." We will again see that social stratification in the United States is in many ways different from social stratification in other industrial nations: Without considering this subject matter for other countries, we would therefore miss this important fact and, subsequently, miss opportunities to ask exactly how stratification is different in the United States, and, most importantly, why.

It has become increasingly important to recognize the existence and impact of a world stratification as well. Almost 30 years of steadily increasing inequality in the

United States cannot be understood without reference to the global stratification system in which American corporations are trying to compete. Further, with over 1 billion people in this world living on less than \$1 per day, and the number growing in some world regions, global inequality has become an ever more serious problem. The first protest at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle during the fall of 1999 began bringing these facts of global poverty to greater attention. Terrorist attacks on the United States brought more people to think about the links between political violence and world poverty, with opinion polls in late 2001 indicating most people in the world believe the United States' foreign and economic policies are in part to blame for increasing world poverty (*International Herald Tribune*, December 19, 2001). As we will see in the concluding chapter of this book, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that world opinion is not completely incorrect.

For the most part, this seventh edition provides an extensive updated edition. New data have been provided throughout the book, although by design this updating has focused on Chapters 2 and 9, the dimensions of inequality in the United States and American poverty.

Before concluding this preface I should note that, like the first edition, the basic orientation of this book continues to follow a general conflict perspective. This is not to say that other perspectives have been neglected, but that with the subject of social stratification I continue to believe that a conflict perspective of some variety is most useful in understanding the subject matter. A central, often violent, question about social stratification continues to be how valued goods and services are to be distributed in a society and the world. This underlying conflict is sometimes hidden, sometimes tamed, but no less behind all systems of social stratification. When overt conflict over the distribution of valued goods and services is relatively low, it only means that the system of stratification has been somewhat successful in managing such conflict (at least for a time). As I completed work on this seventh edition, I was again conducting research in Southeast Asia, as I had been off and on for a few years. Seeing third world poverty up close, meeting people in small villages and huge urban slums, I have come to realize that the anti-globalization protesters and some parts of the modern world system theory have it only partially correct. It is clear that extreme poverty in many countries around the world helps contribute to inequality and poverty here at home in the United States. Corporations can move their operations away from U.S. locations for places in other countries where the average wage is \$1 a day or less. Some of these corporations now produce their products in "sweatshops" accurately described by global protestors. However, we must understand that the poverty of more than a billion people is so extensive that they are fighting to get jobs in those sweatshops; landing a job in such places is a clear step up in their lives. Parents in rich countries such as the United States may hope their sons and daughters grow up with a good college education and become doctors, lawyers, and such. Millions of parents in third world countries hope their sons and daughters simply live through childhood, and can then better their lives with a job in one of those sweatshops. World opinion and global protestors are also only partially correct in charging that the policies of rich nations and their multinational corporations are often contributors to global inequality and poverty. This is often, but not always, the case. Why do we find some poorer countries with extensive multinational corporate investment from rich

countries, such as Thailand and Vietnam, with huge decreases in poverty over the years, while other nations in the same region (such as Laos, Burma, and Cambodia) continue to have the worst levels of poverty and hopelessness in the world? With global inequality and poverty growing rapidly in many regions, conflict theories accurately predict that there is a danger it will explode into more and more political violence and terrorism. Now more than ever we need to better understand why some countries are able to bring their people out of poverty, while the people of many more countries remain ensnared in poverty and a cycle of misery that threatens to kill many millions of people and throw the world into wars potentially more deadly than those of the 20th century. These are lofty questions, perhaps, but they are among those we must attempt to answer in the coming pages of this book.

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Introduction

C H A P T E R 1

Perspectives and Concepts in the Study of Social Stratification



The extremes of wealth and poverty in the United States are no better captured than in these pictures of the Mar-a-Lago Estate, owned by Donald Trump, and a homeless family in one of our major cities.

SOURCE: Top: Steve Starr/Corbis; bottom: Jack Star/Photolink/Getty Images

Chapter Outline

- ❖ Michael
 - ❖ David
 - ❖ Definitions and Concepts
 - ❖ Social Stratification in the Modern World System
 - ❖ The Organization of Chapters
 - ❖ Summary
-

In understanding human beings and human societies, no subject is more important than social stratification. A system of social stratification and occupational ranking helps shape how people live, their opportunities for a better life, their mental health and life expectancy, and much more (Weeden and Grusky 2005). On a more general level, a system of social stratification has an important influence on events such as war and peace, economic expansion or stagnation, unemployment and inflation, and government policies of many kinds.

Most people, of course, are aware of the fact that some people are rich while others are poor. But people in general are usually less aware of the rather systematic social forces that structure such outcomes. They prefer to think that people themselves are responsible for their lot in life. This type of belief is especially strong among the nonpoor and whites in the United States, with its values of freedom and individualism. Most people, too, are aware of the fact that some individuals have more influence than others, with the power to shape national issues of war and peace, economic well-being, and general social welfare. But, again, people are usually much less aware of how a system of stratification forms the basis for such influence. They prefer to think that great men and women determine historical events; the possibility that great men and women are themselves a product of a system of social stratification is less obvious to most people. And finally, most people are aware of racial, ethnic, and gender inequalities. Especially because of America's racial and ethnic diversity, there is no doubt greater awareness of this inequality here than in most places in the world. However, it is also because of the reality of these inequalities and their significance in the American society that there are so many ideologies and misconceptions about these inequalities. Most people do not fully understand the structural nature of these inequalities and often misjudge the level of inequality based on occupation, race, ethnicity, and gender (Osberg and Smeeding 2006).

We can begin our study of social stratification on the level of individual life histories. Individual life histories alone, of course, can tell us very little about an overall *system* of social stratification. It should also be recognized that the subject of sociology, and thus social stratification, is concerned with group properties, social structures, and social forces. In other words, sociology is concerned primarily with groups or aggregates of people, not individual biographies. For example, if sociologists want to understand crime or mental illness, they are interested in the social forces that help produce such phenomena. On an individual level, many *unique* influences may be shaping human behavior. Thus, to increase the power of our explanations or sociological theories, we

concern ourselves with more general social forces that affect many people in a nation and globally. As in any science, our intent is to get the most general explanations or understanding out of the smallest number of variables in our theories.

With this in mind, however, we can examine individual biographies as examples, and for the questions they raise. For maximum effect, let us consider a life history on each extreme of the stratification system in the United States. These life histories and their details may seem a bit dated now, but as we will see, they highlight principles of social stratification that are even more important in the United States today.

✧ Michael

Michael was born in August 1965, in the low-income, predominantly black area of Los Angeles called Watts. There is some distinction in the place and timing of Michael's birth not only because he was born 6 months after his mother began a jail term but also because his birth occurred a few days after one of the worst race riots in U.S. history—a race riot that was only one of the first of over 300 that sprang up, one after another, through 1968 (Salert and Sprague 1980). Given these circumstances, we have a rather detailed description of Michael's early life provided by Richard Meyers of the *Los Angeles Times*; it is a life history that parallels the troubled history of the low-income urban area of Los Angeles since Michael was born (see the *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 1980).

Michael's mother was involved in a daily struggle to find money for food and shelter for herself and a 1-year-old child with a disability when a knife fight led to her arrest and jail term. Despite considerable pressure to the contrary, Michael's mother Judy did not give up her baby born while in prison. Michael and his brother were placed in separate foster homes until Judy could care for her children adequately. During his 3 years in the foster home, Michael was healthy and developed with the likes and dislikes of any young child—he “hated green peas and haircuts”; he loved his toys, dog, and ice cream; and he enjoyed playing with his foster father's tools.

Judy was out of prison after 3 years, but she was also out of work and had no place to live. For the next 17 months she lived in 10 different locations—including her mother's apartment, two foster homes, her stepfather's back porch, and a truck. With an unemployment rate of 20 percent in the area at the time, jobs were extremely scarce. She reports working for a time with a temporary government work project, and for a time as an aide in a parole office. She also tried her hand at being a pimp for gay men, which brought her considerably more money but also a life she rejected in order to provide a home for her children. Pregnant again at age 18, she gave up hustling for welfare and her children.

Judy was happy when Michael was returned to her, although she wept for many days when Michael cried for his foster parents. She began receiving a welfare check, like 265,221 other people in the area. But the amount received, despite California's more “generous” assistance level, was inadequate for her needs and the needs of three children. (At the time in California, a mother with three children could receive less than \$400 per month with a basic welfare grant under Aid to Families with Dependent Children and including food stamps.) Judy and her three children were forced to live with relatives in a three-bedroom apartment that was home for 13 people.

To some extent, Judy and Michael's prospects improved when Judy married a man who was employed as a janitor. They moved to a rented apartment of their own in a low-income housing project. Like most mothers, Judy loved her children and did her best to provide for them. Michael remembers she always wrote "I love you" on his lunch sack when he began school. She saved to buy Christmas presents for the kids, and did volunteer work at Michael's preschool.

With marriage Judy had her fourth child. But as is too often the case for many poor children, the relatively good times did not last. Judy's marriage began breaking up and she turned to drugs. The children were chased by rats in the apartment, rats that sometimes woke them up at night, and Michael was bitten by a tarantula. Again they moved, and again Judy was alone with her children.

Their new apartment was not much better, but the rats were less of a problem. Judy was back on the welfare rolls, and the area they lived in was one of the most crime-prone and violent. Judy first placed Michael in a Catholic school to keep him away from the crime and gangs in the public school, but it did not last. Both Judy and Michael describe being embarrassed when comparing themselves with the parents and children in this new school, with the embarrassment reaching a peak when Judy could not afford 11 cents for the required pencil and eraser at the school. Michael was placed in the public school.

When he was 7 years old, Michael saw a man killed for the first time. The man was driving an ice cream truck in front of Michael's apartment when several young boys stopped the truck, beat the man, and took \$12. Other residents in the area took all the ice cream out of the truck. This was only the first of many people Michael saw killed before he was 15.

Michael's 16-month-old sister was killed when she fell from their apartment stairs. Judy took the death with much grief and alcohol. Shortly afterward, when Michael was in the third grade, he was again placed in a foster home. This time it was because of a child abuse charge against Judy. Michael had broken his arm but was unable to convince anyone that it had happened in a fall away from home. Again Judy found it difficult to live with her life. Michael remembers crying night after night for his mother. The alleged child abuse, however, did appear unfounded, and Michael was returned to Judy after a judge became convinced of her innocence.

At about this time Michael also found the influence of street gangs difficult to resist. He was arrested for shoplifting when he was in third grade. By the time he was 10 there were other arrests and gang fights for Michael. By age 15 he had experienced anger over his mother's beating and gang rape by young boys, he had seen more men killed, and he had to bear the fact that his and his mother's possessions were stolen time and time again. He had seen his mother sick because of hunger, and he had stolen food. Michael still lived in the area of the 1965 Watts riot, which in the 1990s had an even higher rate of crime. Also, by the age of 15, Michael was in jail; 9 months after the story on Michael appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* his mother was found shot to death.

The future for Michael, along with that of millions of children in similar circumstances in this country, does not look good. Judging from the experience of most middle-aged men in the area of Watts, we might expect Michael to be in and out of the unemployment lines throughout his life; when work is found it will be low-paid and low-skilled. Given changes in the U.S. economy, as Michael was coming of age, the pay

for low-skilled workers will become even lower in coming years, if such work can be found at all. Of course, there is a strong possibility that he will be in and out of prison as well, if not killed, like many young people in places such as Watts, where the leading cause of death for men is gunshot.

We can feel sorry and angry for, and about, Judy and Michael; but sorrow and anger are not the intent of the preceding description. It is meant to illustrate not just the misfortunes of one family but the experience of many families who are poor (of no matter what race) in the United States. Such experiences are no doubt varied, for, contrary to popular belief, the poor represent a diverse segment of our population. But the poor do have many common problems that are presented by their common position at the bottom of the stratification system in an affluent society. We will consider the questions this case presents for the study of social stratification after we examine the case of David.

✧ David

David was born at the other end of the stratification system in this country—at the top. His parents were not only rich, but they were among the superrich and powerful. David was born in 1915, the youngest of six children. His father had assets of at least \$0.5 billion, which he had inherited from his father (Collier and Horowitz 1976:133). David, like Michael, grew up in a number of dwellings, though, as might be expected, there were a number of differences. For one, the several dwellings were all owned by the family—all at the same time. The homes were substantially less crowded than Michael's first (three bedrooms for 13 people), and it is rather doubtful that they had rats, spiders, and cockroaches.

First, there was the family's New York City townhouse on Fifth Avenue. Then, for the weekends, there was the Pocantico Hills estate in New York. The 3,500-acre Pocantico estate is five times the size of Central Park in New York City, with a 250-acre park of its own. At Pocantico, David and his brothers and sister could “go to the stone stables and have the riding master take them out on the trails; they could check out one of the fleet of electric cars that sailed silently around the grounds” (Collier and Horowitz 1976:182). It took \$50,000 a year to maintain the “Big House” on this estate, and a total of \$500,000 per year to maintain the whole estate.

During the summers David's family spent most of its time at its estate in Seal Harbor, Maine. Here the children could go sailing in the many boats or go on long walks to the “cabin” deep in the woods on the estate (Collier and Horowitz 1976:181–182). Finally, if they really wanted to get away, there was a home in the Virgin Islands, a Venezuelan ranch, and a ranch in the Grand Teton Mountains (Dye 1979:158).

We would expect that David was much like Michael as a 2-year-old child. He was curious about his environment, he loved to play with his toys, and, though never mentioned in biographies, we might expect that he liked ice cream. But David had a much wider and safer environment to explore, and his toys were more numerous and expensive. After this young age, the differences grew much wider. David did not grow up with street crime and violence, it is doubtful he ever saw a man killed, and his schools were much different. He went to the elite Lincoln School near the Pocantico Hills estate, then