

# The **American Class Structure** in an Age of **Growing Inequality**



**Dennis Gilbert**  
**9th Edition**



# The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality

*Ninth Edition*

Dennis Gilbert

*Hamilton College*



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# The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality

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# About the Author

**Dennis Gilbert** holds a PhD from Cornell University and has taught at Cornell, the Universidad Católica in Lima, Peru, and Hamilton College, where he is Professor of Sociology. He is also the author of *Mexico's Middle Class in the Neoliberal Era* (2007), *Sandinistas: The Party and the Revolution* (1991), and *La Oligarquía Peruana: Historia de Tres Familias* (1982).

# Preface

I was 12 years old when the original version of *The American Class Structure* was being written in 1955. The author was Joseph Kahl, an unemployed Harvard PhD then living cheaply in Mexico. His book, which helped define the emerging field of social stratification, remained in print, without revision, for 25 years. It earned this long run by presenting a lucid synthesis of the best research on the American class system. Each study was lovingly dissected by Kahl, who conveyed its flavor, assessed its strengths and weaknesses, summarized its most significant conclusions, and explained how they were reached.

*The American Class Structure* was not a theoretical book. Kahl created a simple conceptual schema with a short list of key variables drawn from the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Kahl admitted that he had settled on this framework for the good and practical reason that it allowed him to draw together the results of disparate research reports. But the variables were interrelated, and Kahl believed that they tended to converge to create social classes in a pattern he called the American class structure. At the same time, he recognized that classes and class structure are abstractions from social reality—tendencies never fully realized in any situation but discernable when one stepped back from detail to think about underlying forces.

Sometime around 1980, Kahl invited me to collaborate on a new version of *The American Class Structure*. He was then professor of sociology at Cornell, and I had recently completed a PhD under his guidance. The book we published in 1982 encompassed a body of stratification research that had grown enormously in sophistication and volume since the 1950s. *The American Class Structure: A New Synthesis* consisted almost entirely of fresh material but preserved the general framework of the original edition and its analyses of classic studies of the American class system. That edition and two subsequent editions, which Kahl and I produced together, proved popular with a new generation of sociologists and sociology students.

But when our publisher asked for yet another edition, Kahl, who had retired to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, said he'd rather be listening to opera or playing golf than reading page proofs again. And since he would not be contributing to the new edition, he asked that his name be taken off the cover. Thus, the subsequent editions have been published under my name.

Although there is now only one official author, the authorial "I" reverts to "we" after this preface. Much of this book is the product of a long collaboration, and I am often at a loss to recall who wrote (or perhaps rewrote) a particular passage. Retaining the "we" of earlier editions seemed perfectly natural. That said, I want to stress that I bear sole responsibility for every word included in this edition.

I am, in particular, responsible for the theme that runs through the recent editions and is reflected in the tag line to the revised title: *In an Age of Growing Inequality*. This theme was inspired by data on trends in earnings, income, wealth, and related variables that reveal a remarkably consistent pattern of rising class inequalities since the mid-1970s. This pattern sharply contrasts with the broadly shared prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s. The text repeatedly returns to a fundamental question: Why is this happening?

Like its predecessors, the ninth edition of *The American Class Structure* is not an encyclopedic survey of stratification research, nor is it an exercise in class theory. It revolves around a short list of variables, largely derived from classical theory; highlights selected empirical studies; and focuses on the socioeconomic core of the class system. It emphasizes the effects of class differences on our everyday lives. Gender and race are treated in relation to class, rather than as parallel dimensions of stratification. The book looks at economic disparities between men and women and among whites, blacks and Hispanics. More profoundly, it considers the effects on the class system of developments such as women's changing economic role, new patterns of family life and occupational differentiation among African Americans. A guiding assumption is that the experience of class is inextricably bound up with gender and race.

For this edition, I have made revisions to nearly every chapter, adding fresh material on income, wealth, earnings, jobs, poverty, politics, class segregation, and other topics—especially as they are relevant to the theme of growing inequality. At several points I discuss the effects of the Great Recession, which have lingered well beyond its official duration, December 2007 to June 2009.

Two well-received features of recent editions have been retained. One is the glossary, added to make life easier for readers who are puzzled by Marx's use of the term "ideology," uncertain about the exact meaning of "net worth," or unable to recall how the text defined "postindustrial society." Readers will find a list of relevant glossary terms at the end of each chapter. The other is the streamlined citation of government statistics. In order to produce a less cluttered text, I have eliminated most references to standard statistical series on income, poverty, employment, and related topics. On this feature, see the "Notes on Statistical Sources" at the end of the book. There are lots of tables in this book. Readers can be assured that table columns or rows that end in 100 percent (or 100.0 percent) cover all the individuals in the relevant category, even though they occasionally add up to 101 percent or 99 percent. The difference is the result of so-called "rounding errors" and should be ignored.

In earlier prefaces, Kahl and I thanked many friends, colleagues, and students whose help made *The American Class Structure* a better book. This edition has benefited from able research assistance provided by Anne Mesmer, a senior at Georgetown University.

Joe Kahl passed away on January 1, 2010. I remember him as an accomplished scholar, a fine teacher, a generous friend, and still my coauthor.

Dennis Gilbert  
Washington, DC

# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>About the Author</b>   | <b>ix</b> |
| <b>Preface</b>  | <b>xi</b> |
| <b>Chapter 1. Social Class in America</b>                                   | <b>1</b>  |
| Karl Marx   | 3         |
| Max Weber   | 7         |
| Three Issues and Ten Variables  | 11        |
| What Are Social Classes?  | 11        |
| An American Class Structure   | 13        |
| Is the American Class Structure Changing?                                   | 15        |
| Conclusion  | 18        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary   | 18        |
| Suggested Readings  | 18        |
| <b>Chapter 2. Position and Prestige</b>                                     | <b>21</b> |
| W. Lloyd Warner: Prestige Classes in Yankee City                            | 22        |
| Prestige Class as a Concept   | 25        |
| How Many Classes?   | 25        |
| Class Structure of the Metropolis   | 28        |
| Prestige of Occupation  | 32        |
| Occupations and Social Classes  | 35        |
| People Like Us  | 36        |
| Conclusion: Perception of Rank and Strata                                   | 38        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary   | 39        |
| Suggested Readings  | 39        |
| <b>Chapter 3. Social Class, Occupation, and Social Change</b>               | <b>41</b> |
| Middletown: 1890 and 1924   | 42        |
| Middletown Revisited  | 43        |
| Industrialization and the Transformation of the<br>National Class Structure | 44        |
| The National Upper Class  | 45        |
| The Industrial Working Class  | 47        |
| The New Middle Class  | 49        |
| National Occupational System  | 50        |



|  |            |
|--|------------|
| The Transformations of the American Occupational Structure           | 52         |
| From Agricultural to Postindustrial Society                          | 54         |
| Women Workers in Postindustrial Society                              | 57         |
| Transformation of the Black Occupational Structure                   | 59         |
| Hispanic Workers in Postindustrial Society                           | 61         |
| Wages in the Age of Growing Inequality                               | 61         |
| Growing Inequality of Wages: Why?                                    | 64         |
| Harrison and Bluestone: New Corporate Strategies                     | 67         |
| Frank and Cook: Winner Take All                                      | 68         |
| Conclusion   | 70         |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                    | 71         |
| Suggested Readings   | 71         |
| <b>Chapter 4. Wealth and Income</b>                                  | <b>73</b>  |
| The Income Parade  | 74         |
| Lessons From the Parade  | 78         |
| The Distribution of Income   | 80         |
| Sources of Income  | 82         |
| Income Shares  | 83         |
| Taxes and Transfers: The Government as Robin Hood?                   | 83         |
| How Many Poor?   | 86         |
| Women and the Distribution of Household Income                       | 87         |
| The Distribution of Wealth   | 89         |
| Trends in the Distribution of Wealth                                 | 92         |
| Trends in the Distribution of Income                                 | 93         |
| Income Dynamics  | 96         |
| Changing Tax Rates   | 97         |
| Conclusion   | 99         |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                    | 100        |
| Suggested Readings   | 100        |
| <b>Chapter 5. Socialization, Association, Lifestyles, and Values</b> | <b>103</b> |
| Bourdieu: The Varieties of Capital                                   | 104        |
| Children's Conception of Social Class                                | 105        |
| Kohn: Class and Socialization  | 106        |
| Lareau: Child Rearing Observed                                       | 109        |
| School and Marriage  | 112        |
| Marriage Styles  | 116        |
| Blue-Collar Marriages and Middle-Class Models                        | 119        |
| Social Class and Domestic Violence                                   | 123        |
| Informal Association Among Adults                                    | 124        |
| Formal Associations  | 127        |
| Separate Lives   | 128        |
| Residential Segregation  | 130        |
| Conclusion   | 131        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                    | 132        |
| Suggested Readings   | 133        |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Chapter 6. Social Mobility: The Societal Context</b>             | <b>135</b> |
| How Much Mobility?  | 136        |
| Wealth Mobility   | 139        |
| Social Mobility of Women  | 139        |
| Circulation and Structural Mobility                                 | 141        |
| Declining Social Mobility   | 143        |
| Conclusion  | 144        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                   | 145        |
| Suggested Readings  | 145        |
| <b>Chapter 7. Family, Education, and Career</b>                     | <b>147</b> |
| Blau and Duncan: Analyzing Mobility Models                          | 149        |
| Jencks on Equality  | 153        |
| Who Goes to College?  | 154        |
| The Stratification of Higher Education                              | 157        |
| Conclusion  | 159        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                   | 160        |
| Suggested Readings  | 160        |
| <b>Chapter 8. Elites, the Capitalist Class, and Political Power</b> | <b>163</b> |
| Three Perspectives on Power   | 164        |
| Mills: The National Power Elite                                     | 164        |
| Mills, His Critics, and the Problem of Elite Cohesion               | 166        |
| Power Elite or Ruling Class?  | 169        |
| Who Rules?  | 170        |
| The National Capitalist Class: Economic Basis                       | 173        |
| The National Capitalist Class: Social Basis                         | 179        |
| The National Capitalist Class: Participation in Government          | 182        |
| Money and Politics  | 185        |
| Who Gives?  | 187        |
| What Do Rich People Want?   | 188        |
| Business Lobbies  | 189        |
| Policy-Planning Groups  | 190        |
| Indirect Mechanisms of Capitalist-Class Influence                   | 191        |
| The Capitalist-Class Resurgence                                     | 193        |
| Conclusion  | 194        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                   | 195        |
| Suggested Readings  | 196        |
| <b>Chapter 9. Class Consciousness and Class Conflict</b>            | <b>197</b> |
| Marx and the Origins of Class Consciousness                         | 199        |
| Richard Centers and Class Identification                            | 201        |
| Correlates of Class Identification                                  | 202        |
| Married Women and Class Identification                              | 203        |
| Class Identification, Political Opinion, and Voting                 | 204        |
| Bott: Frames of Reference   | 204        |
| Elections and the Democratic Class Struggle                         | 206        |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Policy Preference and Government Response                              | 209        |
| Class and Political Participation                                      | 212        |
| Class Conflict and the Labor Movement                                  | 213        |
| The Postwar Armistice: Unions in the Age of Shared Prosperity          | 215        |
| Labor in Decline   | 217        |
| Hacker and Pierson: Winner-Take-All Politics                           | 220        |
| Conclusion   | 222        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                      | 223        |
| Suggested Readings   | 223        |
| <b>Chapter 10. The Poor, the Underclass, and Public Policy</b>         | <b>225</b> |
| The Beginnings of Welfare: Roosevelt                                   | 227        |
| Rediscovery of Poverty: Kennedy and Johnson                            | 228        |
| The Official Definition of Poverty                                     | 229        |
| How Many Poor?   | 231        |
| Who Are the Poor?  | 232        |
| Trends in Poverty  | 235        |
| The Underclass and the Transitory Poor                                 | 236        |
| Restructuring Welfare  | 238        |
| Poverty, the Social Safety Net, and the Great Recession                | 241        |
| The Mystery of Persistent Poverty                                      | 243        |
| Conclusion   | 248        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                      | 250        |
| Suggested Readings   | 250        |
| <b>Chapter 11. The American Class Structure and Growing Inequality</b> | <b>253</b> |
| How Many Classes Are There?  | 254        |
| The Class Structure  | 257        |
| Growing Inequality   | 261        |
| Why?   | 264        |
| Hard Times in the Age of Growing Inequality                            | 266        |
| Key Terms Defined in the Glossary                                      | 266        |
| <b>Glossary</b>  | <b>267</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>  | <b>279</b> |
| <b>Note on Statistical Sources</b>                                     | <b>299</b> |
| <b>Credits</b>   | <b>301</b> |
| <b>Index</b>   | <b>303</b> |

## CHAPTER 1

# Social Class in America

*All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-borne, the other the mass of the people. . . . The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. . . . Give, therefore, to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second, and as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they therefore will ever maintain good government.*

Alexander Hamilton (1780)

On the night the *Titanic* sank on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic in 1912, social class proved to be a key determinant of who survived and who perished. Among those who lost their lives were 40 percent of the first-class passengers, 58 percent of the second-class passengers, and 75 percent of the third-class passengers. The class differences were even starker for women and children (who were given priority access to the lifeboats): just 7 percent of first-class, but over half of third-class passengers, went down with the *Titanic* (U.S. Senate 1912).

The divergent fates of the *Titanic*'s passengers present a dramatic illustration of the connection between social class and what pioneer sociologist Max Weber called **life chances**. Weber invented the term to emphasize the extent to which our chances for the good things in life are shaped by class position.

Contemporary sociology has followed Weber's lead and found that the influence of social class on our lives is indeed pervasive. Table 1.1 gives a few examples. These statistics compare people at the bottom, middle, and top of the class structure. They show, among other things, that people in the bottom 25 percent are less likely to be in good health, less likely to have Internet access, more likely to have physically punishing jobs, and more likely to be the victims of violent crime. Those in the top 25 percent are healthier, safer, more likely to send their kids to college, and more likely to find their lives exciting.

Thoughtful observers have recognized the importance of social classes since the beginnings of Western philosophy. They knew that some individuals and families had more money, more influence, or more prestige than their neighbors.

**Table 1.1** Life Chances by Social Class<sup>a</sup>

|  | Bottom | Middle | Top |
|--|--------|--------|-----|
| In excellent/very good health <sup>b</sup>                   | 40%    | 52%    | 69% |
| Victims of violent crime/1000 population <sup>c</sup>        | 52     | 28     | 19  |
| Own home <sup>b</sup>  | 31%    | 67%    | 93% |
| Home Internet access <sup>b</sup>                            | 56%    | 79%    | 97% |
| Children 18–24 in college or college graduates <sup>d</sup>  | 30%    | 52%    | 72% |
| Job requires lifting, pulling, pushing, bending <sup>b</sup> | 71%    | 49%    | 33% |
| Find life “exciting” (not “routine” or “dull”) <sup>b</sup>  | 46%    | 47%    | 67% |

a. Classes defined by income: bottom 25 percent, middle 50 percent, and top 25 percent.

b. General Social Survey 2010. Computed for this table.

c. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics 2011.

d. In 2005. Calculated from U.S. Census statistics.

The philosophers also realized that the differences were more than personal or even familial, for the pattern of inequalities tended to congeal into strata of families who shared similar positions. These social strata or classes divided society into a hierarchy; each stratum had interests or goals in common with equals but different from, and often conflicting with, those of groups above or below them. Finally, it was noted that political action often flows from class interests. As one of the founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, observed, the rich seek social stability to preserve their advantages, but the poor work for social change that would bring them a larger share of the world's rewards.

This book is an analysis of the American class system. We explore class differences in income, prestige, power, and other key variables. We will point out how these variables react on one another—for instance, how a person's income affects beliefs about social policy or how one's job affects the choice of friends or spouse. And we will explore the question of movement from one class to another, recognizing that a society can have classes and still permit individuals to rise or fall among them.

We begin by consulting two major theorists of social stratification, Karl Marx and Max Weber, to identify the major facets of the subject. Marx (1818–1883) and Weber (1864–1920) established an intellectual framework that strongly influenced subsequent scholars. (**Social stratification**, by the way, refers to social ranking based on characteristics such as wealth, occupation, or prestige.)

## Karl Marx

---

Although the discussion of stratification goes back to ancient philosophy, modern attempts to formulate a systematic theory of class differences began with Marx's work in the nineteenth century. Most subsequent theorizing has represented an attempt either to reformulate or to refute his ideas. Marx, who was born in the wake of the French Revolution and lived in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, was both a radical activist and a scholar of social and political change. He saw the study of social class as the key to an understanding of the turbulent events of his time. His studies of economics, history, and philosophy convinced him that societies are mainly shaped by their economic organization and that social classes form the link between economic facts and social facts. He also concluded that fundamental social change is the product of conflict between classes. Thus, in Marx's view, an understanding of classes is basic to comprehending how societies function and how they are transformed.

In Marx's work, social classes are defined by their distinctive relationships to the **means of production**. Taking this approach, Marx defined two classes in the emerging industrial societies of his own time: the capitalist class (or **bourgeoisie**) and the working class (or **proletariat**). He describes the bourgeoisie as the class that owns the means of production, such as mines or factories, and the proletariat as the class of those who must sell their labor to the owners of the means to earn a wage and stay alive. Marx maintained that in modern, capitalist society, each of these two

basic classes tends toward an internal homogeneity that obliterates differences within them. Little businesses lose out in competition with big businesses, concentrating ownership in a small bourgeoisie of monopoly capitalists. In a parallel fashion, gradations within the proletariat fade in significance as machines get more sophisticated and do the work that used to be done by skilled workers. As the basic classes become internally homogenized, the middle of the class structure thins out and the system as a whole becomes polarized between the two class extremes.

But notice that these broad generalizations refer to long-range trends. Marx recognized that at any given historical moment, the reality of the class system was more complex. The simplifying processes of homogenization and polarization were tendencies, unfolding over many decades, which might never be fully realized. Marx's descriptions of contemporary situations in his writings as a journalist and pamphleteer show more complexity in economic and political groupings than do his writings as a theorist of long-term historical development.

We have noted that Marx defined the proletariat, bourgeoisie, and other classes by their relationship to the means of production. Why? In the most general sense, because he regarded production as the center of social life. He reasoned that people must produce to survive, and they must cooperate to produce. The individual's place in society, relationships to others, and outlook on life are shaped by his or her work experience. More specifically, those who occupy a similar role in production are likely to share economic and political interests that bring them into conflict with other participants in production. Capitalists, for instance, reap profit (in Marx's terms, *expropriate surplus*) by paying their workers less than the value of what they produce. Therefore, capitalists share an interest in holding down wages and resisting legislation that would enhance the power of unions to press their demands on employers.

From a Marxist perspective, the manner in which production takes place (that is, the application of technology to nature) and the class and property relationships that develop in the course of production are the most fundamental aspects of any society. Together, they constitute what Marx called the **mode of production**. Societies with similar modes of production ought to be similar in other significant respects and should therefore be studied together. Marx's analysis of European history after the fall of Rome distinguished three modes of production, which he saw as successive stages of societal development: *feudalism*, the locally based agrarian society of the Middle Ages, in which a small landowning aristocracy in each district exploited the labor of a peasant majority; *capitalism*, the emerging industrial and commercial order of Marx's own lifetime, already international in scope and characterized by the dominance of the owners of industry over the mass of industrial workers; and *communism*, the technologically advanced, classless society of the future, in which all productive property would be held in common.

Marx regarded the mode of production as the main determinant of a society's **superstructure** of social and political institutions and ideas. He used the concept of superstructure to answer an old question: How do privileged minorities maintain their positions and contain the potential resistance of exploited majorities? His reply was that the class that controls the means of production typically controls the

means of compulsion and persuasion—the superstructure. He observed that in feudal times, the landowners monopolized military and political power. With the rise of modern capitalism, the bourgeoisie gained control of political institutions. In each case, the privileged class could use the power of the state to protect its own interests. For instance, in Marx's own time, the judicial, legislative, and police authority of European governments dominated by the bourgeoisie were employed to crush the early labor movement, a pattern that was repeated a little later in the United States. In an insightful overstatement from the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx asserted, "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx 1978:475).

But Marx did not believe that class systems rested on pure compulsion. He allowed for the persuasive influence of ideas. Here, Marx made one of his most significant contributions to social science: the concept of **ideology**. He used the term to describe the pervasive ideas that uphold the *status quo* and sustain the ruling class. Marx noted that human consciousness is a social product. It develops through our experience of cooperating with others to produce and to sustain social life. But social experience is not homogeneous, especially in a society that is divided into classes. The peasant does not have the same experience as the landlord and therefore develops a distinct outlook. One important feature of this differentiation of class outlooks is the tendency for members of each group to regard their own particular class interests as the true interests of the whole society. What makes this significant is that one class has superior capacity to impose its self-serving ideas on other classes.

The class that dominates production, Marx argued, also controls the institutions that produce and disseminate ideas, such as schools, mass media, churches, and courts. As a result, the viewpoint of the dominant class pervades thinking in areas as diverse as the laws of family life and property, theories of political democracy, notions of economic rationality, and even conceptions of the afterlife. In Marx's (1978) words, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (p. 172). In extreme situations, ideology can convince slaves that they ought to be obedient to their masters, or poor workers that their true reward will eventually come to them in heaven.

Marx (1978) maintained, then, that the ruling class had powerful political and ideological means to support the established order. Nonetheless, he regarded class societies as intrinsically unstable. In a famous passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, he observed,

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social



rank. In ancient Rome, we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations. . . .

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: It has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (pp. 473–474)

As these lines suggest, Marx saw class struggle as the basic source of social change. He coupled class conflict to economic change, arguing that the development of new means of production (for example, the development of modern industry) implied the emergence of new classes and class relationships. The most serious political conflicts develop when the interests of a rising class are opposed to those of an established ruling class. Class struggles of this sort can produce a “revolutionary reconstitution of society.” Notice that each epoch creates within itself the growth of a new class that eventually seizes power and inaugurates a new epoch.

Two eras of transformation through class conflict held particular fascination for Marx. One was the transition from feudalism to modern capitalism in Europe, a process in which he assigned the bourgeoisie (the urban capitalist class) “a most revolutionary part” (Marx 1978:475). Into a previously stable agrarian society, the bourgeoisie introduced a stream of technological innovations, an accelerating expansion of production and trade, and radically new forms of labor relations. The feudal landlords, feeling their own interests threatened, resisted change. The result was a series of political conflicts (the French Revolution was the most dramatic instance) through which the European bourgeoisie wrested political power from the landed aristocracy.

Marx believed that a second, analogous era of transformation was beginning during his own lifetime. The capitalist mode of production had created a new social class, the urban working class, or proletariat, with interests directly opposed to those of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie. This conflict of interests arose, not simply from the struggle over wages between **capital** and labor, but from the essential character of capitalist production and society. The capitalist economy was inherently unstable and subject to periodic depressions with massive unemployment. These economic crises heightened awareness of long-term trends widening the gap between rich and poor. Furthermore, capitalism’s blind dependence on market mechanisms built on individual greed created an alienated existence for most members of society. Marx was convinced that only under communism, with the means of production communally controlled, could these conditions be overcome.

The situation of the proletarian majority made it capitalism’s most deprived and alienated victim and therefore the potential spearhead of a communist revolution. However, in Marx’s view, an objective situation of class oppression does not lead directly to political revolt. For that to happen, the oppressed class must first develop **class consciousness**—that is, a sense of shared identity and common grievances, requiring a collective response. Some of Marx’s most fruitful sociological work, to which we will return in Chapter 9, is devoted to precisely this