

Second Edition

Social Stratification and Inequality

Class Conflict in Historical and
Comparative Perspective

Harold R. Kerbo

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND INEQUALITY

**CLASS CONFLICT IN
HISTORICAL AND
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

SECOND EDITION

Harold R. Kerbo

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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND INEQUALITY

Class Conflict in Historical and Comparative Perspective

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PREFACE

The 1980s were good years for many Americans; they were bad years for many others. Since the early 1980s, when the first edition of this book was published, income inequality has grown considerably. The United States, in fact, moved from only an average level of income inequality compared to other industrial nations to the position of highest income inequality (at least by some measures discussed in Chapter 2). Part of this change has occurred because the middle-income group in the United States has been shrinking. At the same time the upper-income segment has grown, while the lower-income group has grown more than any other segment.

Change in the level of income inequality in the United States is only one of the significant changes in the nature of social stratification in the 1980s. As was noted in the first edition of this book, my primary task has been to provide an up-to-date, comprehensive examination of social stratification in human societies. The added task of this second edition is an attempt to understand the very important changes in social stratification that have occurred in this country as well as in other nations in the world since 1980. In addition to general updating, this edition has become much more comparative, as the new subtitle should suggest.

Before I summarize the general subject matter and chapter content of this book, let me note the most significant changes. First, as indicated above, the second edition has required extensive updating. Chapter 2, on the dimensions of inequality in the United States, has been extensively rewritten to include the changes in inequality during the Reagan years. Significant changes have also been made in the theory chapters. Most important, the old Chapter 4, on paradigms of social stratification, has been dropped to make room for additions elsewhere. The idea of paradigms of social stratification, however, has been retained in reduced form in the chapter on classical theories (the new Chapter 4), in order to provide a means for students to classify and make sense

of the differences in stratification theories contained in Chapters 4, 5, and elsewhere.

The chapters on the various classes in the United States, poverty, and social mobility have, of course, required extensive updating because of the new studies on these subjects and the changes of the 1980s. It is especially in Chapter 9, on the working and middle class, that I have included data and research on why these changes have occurred in the United States. To adequately understand the changes in social stratification in the United States, however, it is more necessary than in the past to understand the world stratification system and other countries. In this regard, Chapter 15, on the modern world system, has been extensively changed and updated for an understanding of the position of core nations like the United States, as well as the noncore. The biggest change has occurred with an additional chapter on social stratification in Japan (Chapter 13). As everyone will agree, Japan is a country that Americans must learn more about. But there are other reasons for including a chapter on social stratification in Japan: Japan is the first nation without a western cultural base to achieve advanced industrial status. So far the theories on the nature of social stratification in industrial, capitalist societies have been grounded in the experiences of western societies. Thus, Japan provides us with a most interesting comparison and a test of the western theories of social stratification. Finally, with respect to changes in the second edition, updating Chapter 14, on social stratification in communist societies, has been challenging, to say the least. I have included the basic changes up to the first half of 1990 and have tried to provide a sense of where things seem to be going in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. No doubt this task has been speculative, but we can look to some basic principles of social stratification in industrial societies (capitalist or communist) to help us in this task.

Having described the general changes, let me now outline the basic arrangement of the chapters and subject matter.

Within Part One of this text, the first chapter begins with some preliminary questions for the study of social stratification suggested by the life histories of two people found at either extreme of the stratification system of the United States. From these questions, which I hope will raise further questions and interest, the chapter moves to basic definitions and an outline of major types of stratification systems. Chapter 2 is for the most part descriptive: The extent and degree of inequality in the United States are the subjects. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the history of inequality in human societies. But rather than merely provide a description of inequality and social stratification in many types of societies, Chapter 3 is also designed to provide an idea of the progression of inequality in human societies—that is, where we came from and how we arrived at our present state of inequality.

Building upon the descriptive base of Part One, Part Two takes up the difficult task of explaining the nature of social stratification. Chapter 4 describes the classical theories of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, while Chapter 5 describes the more contemporary theories related to these three. The discussion

of stratification theory comes together toward the end of Chapter 5 with a scheme representing the conflict process of social stratification taken from the variety of conflict theories previously examined. In elementary form, this scheme helps set the stage for an examination of the class systems of industrial nations.

The primary focus of Part Three is the class system of the United States. Chapter 6 introduces a number of preliminary issues (for example, a working definition of class in the United States, class distributions, occupational prestige, subjective class identification). But most importantly, Chapter 6 provides continuity by outlining the major structural bases of class inequality in the United States. Following our discussion of the conflict process of social stratification from Chapter 5, Chapter 6 describes the historical development and importance of the occupational structure, bureaucratic authority structures, and capitalist property structure as battlegrounds for class conflict and the process of inequality in the United States.

The next four chapters are devoted to description and analysis of major class segments in the United States. Chapters 7 and 8 are concerned with the upper class and corporate class, respectively. Chapter 7 examines the power and historical position of wealthy capitalist families—the dominant actors according to the traditional ruling-class perspective. Chapter 8 examines the power and historical position of the new corporate elite of advanced bureaucratic capitalism. While by no means accepting a simple managerial elite or managerial revolution thesis, Chapter 8 presents much of the rapidly emerging research on the United States corporate structure (on such aspects as interlocking directorates, corporate ownership and control, and corporate concentration) to show the importance of the United States corporate structure in understanding inequality and social stratification. In short, Chapters 7 and 8 examine the top of the stratification system.

Going below the top, Chapters 9 and 10 consider the middle class, working class, and lower class (or poor). Contained in these chapters are the usual discussions of class lifestyles, class inequalities, and socialization differences—in essence, the major outcomes and consequences of class location. At this point racial and sex inequality are brought in and related to social stratification in general. Equally important, however, and a major focus of Chapters 9 and 10, is the place of the middle class, working class, and poor in the process of class conflict in the United States. Rather than having us view those below the top as powerless, dependent actors (as a mass-society perspective would have it); a *process* of class conflict requires us to consider how inequalities of wealth, power, and income are shaped by the actions and opportunities not only of elites, but also of those below the elite level. For example, Chapter 10 concludes with an examination of the welfare state as a response to class conflict.

Chapters 11 and 12 conclude the examination of the United States class system by considering the processes of social mobility and the legitimation of inequality. Chapter 11 includes recent theory and research on social mobility and the complex subject of status attainment, as well as an extensive critique

of this material, using recent cross-national and historical information. The legitimization of class inequality as a process is the subject of Chapter 12, with a focus both on the sociopsychological aspect of this process and on more specific attempts to render elite rule and political-economic policy acceptable to those below the elite level.

Finally, Part Four takes us beyond social stratification within advanced capitalist societies such as the United States. As noted above, Chapter 13 attempts a comprehensive analysis of social stratification in Japan, while Chapter 14 provides information on social stratification in communist societies, with a primary focus on the Soviet Union. The goals of these chapters are to trace the similarities and differences in social stratification between communist and capitalist industrial societies and to show the wider utility of the conflict perspective of social stratification followed in the present text. Then, expanding the unit of analysis beyond individual nations, Chapter 15 presents the recently growing research and theory on the world economic system. Following the world system perspective, the focus is on the place of nations within a system of international class conflict and on how many of the principles of class conflict within nations have wider application.

Before concluding this preface I should note that, as in 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 it is to say 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. 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 complete work on this edition, I have been learning about Thai society at Chulalongkorn University, walking the streets of Bangkok and observing the extremes of inequality in a developing country experiencing rapid change. Unlike Cambodia, Burma, and Vietnam, for example, and since the bloody massacre of students in 1976, Thailand has recently experienced less overt violence over the question of who gets what and why. But this does not mean that no conflict is behind the distribution of wealth and poverty in Thailand. It only means that the question of who gets what and why has been somehow tamed for the present. How this can be done in a country with extensive poverty is one of the most interesting and important subjects in the study of social stratification.

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As every writer of a book of this nature comes to recognize, scientific analysis is clearly a collective enterprise. I am indebted to many social scientists whose

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

PERSPECTIVES AND CONCEPTS IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In understanding human beings and human societies, no subject is more important than social stratification. A system of social stratification helps shape how people live, their opportunities for a better life, and their mental health and life expectancy. 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.

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