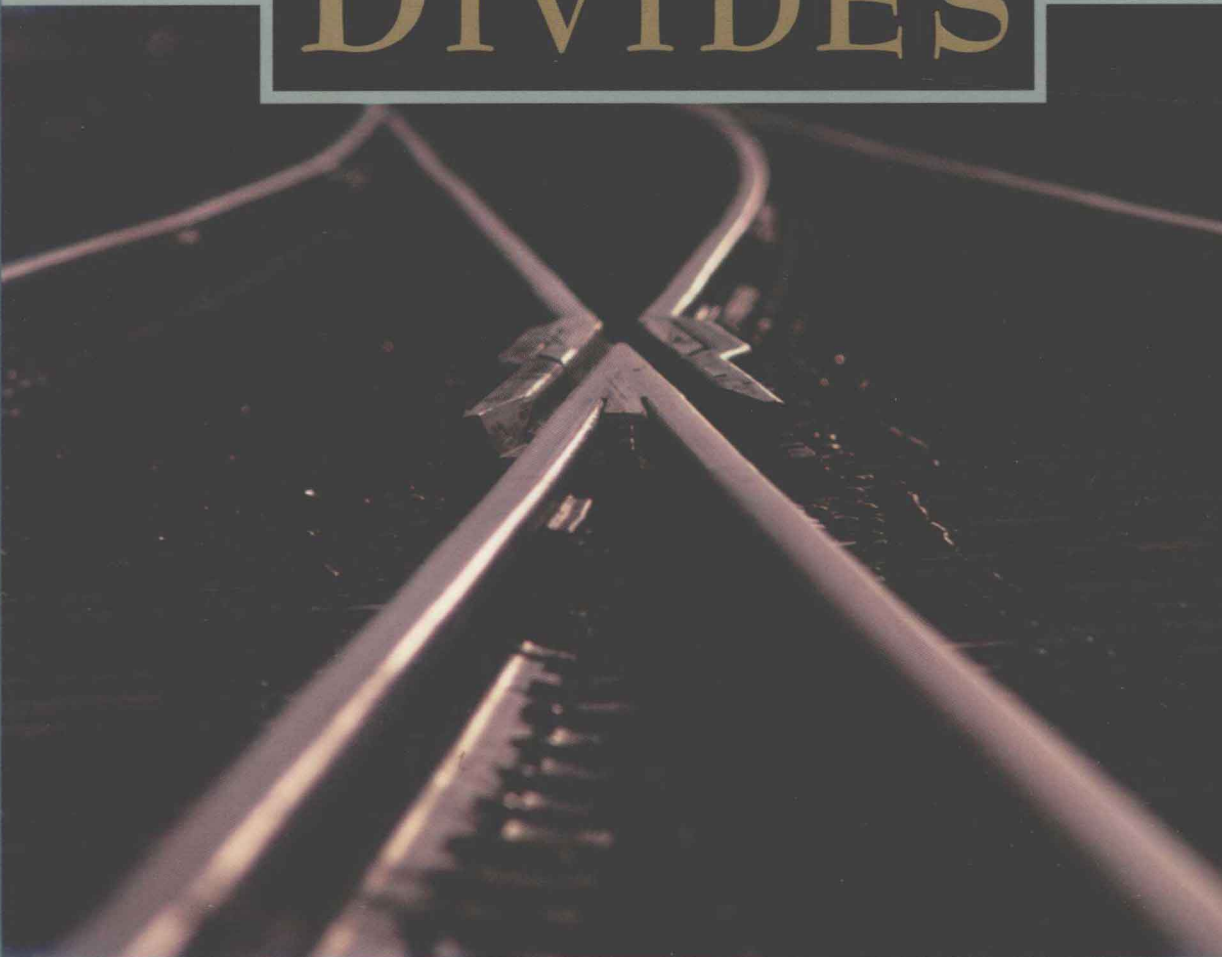


GREAT

DIVIDES



Readings in Social Inequality in the United States

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Thomas M. Shapiro

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Readings in Social Inequality  
in the United States

**Thomas M. Shapiro**  
NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY



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# PREFACE

AS THE TITLE SUGGESTS, *GREAT DIVIDES* IS about the barriers that keep groups and individuals apart from one another in the United States; the obstacles of social inequality and power preventing the formation of a stronger, more united whole; and the great possibilities for this society that go unrealized because of artificial structures for maintaining inequality.

Why should there be another book about social inequality in the United States? Don't we know enough of the dreary details already? Over the past four decades, a number of anthologies have attempted to expose students to the nature, sources, and meanings of inequality. Indeed, at first I was skeptical about the need for yet another reader when an editor first suggested the idea. An examination of available readers quickly changed my mind for two important reasons. First, the existing readers fail to take note of a host of new, creative, rigorous, and very rich scholarship examining social inequality (e.g., studies of class, race, ethnicity, and gender inequality), which has become available in the past several years. Second, the current readers on social inequality do not reflect the rapidly changing basis of inequality in the United States, occurring as a result of economic restructuring and globalization of labor and of markets.

My goal has been to put together an anthology that blends some of the classic essays on inequality and social stratification together with some of the best exciting, new research in the area. In my own teaching, I feel it is very important for students to read good, challenging scholarship in its original form. Too much of what American students read (in scholarly literature, as well as in the popular culture) is filtered information, watered

down for quick consumption. These readings offer a challenging invitation to explore inequality in American society.

This book went through an extraordinary seasoning process. A group of sociologists who teach courses on social inequality were asked to comment on the manuscript at various stages. This high-powered dialogue was funneled through me, and I took their comments and suggestions very seriously. This professional review process was tremendously helpful in sculpting this reader. The common denominator for all participants always was the wish to enlighten our students: to create a teaching tool for fostering better understanding of social inequality. I want to salute this group as a whole, as well as to thank each one individually: Deborah Abowitz, Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science; Lynda Ann Ewen, Marshall University; John L. Hammond, City University of New York Hunter College; Jeanne S. Hurlbert, Louisiana State University; Terry R. Kandal, California State University—Los Angeles; Paul W. Kingston, University of Virginia; Susan Lehrer, State University of New York at New Paltz; Charles W. Mueller, University of Iowa; W. Lawrence Neuman, University of Wisconsin—Whitewater; Georganne Rundblad, Illinois Wesleyan University; Allen Scarborough, Augusta State University; and Amy S. Wharton, Washington State University.

At Mayfield Publishing, I benefited from the creative and patient efforts of a great team, including Julianna Scott Fein, Marty Granahan, Jeanne Schreiber, Amy Folden, and Randy Hurst. Eleanor Gardner, the freelance permissions editor helped to secure the wonderful readings in this book. Special gratitude goes to the detailed and superb

work of the copy editor, Shari Hatch, who deserves more appreciation than I can give.

Mayfield Publishing has an absolute gem in Serina Beauparlant. Serina suggested this project, cajoled me into doing it, put the team of reviewers together, sweated every detail, and continued to find ways to make it a rewarding project.

Many colleagues suggested potential readings for this book. Tom Koenig, Michelle Eayres, Wini Breines, and Melvin Oliver devoted some serious thought to making this a better venture, and I

thank them. At Northeastern University, I had the fantastic assistance of Heather Johnson to support me in gathering and organizing the materials.

Most of all, the support, understanding, and love of Ruth Birnberg helped me through yet another project. To Izak, I apologize, once again, for the distractions this reader meant; in addition, I thank him for sharing with me a child's wondering about what's fair, which is both challenging and inspiring for our future.

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# INTRODUCTION



## THE AMERICAN DREAM— PAST AND PRESENT

We all know that “the American Dream” means economic opportunity, social mobility, and material success. It means that all of us do better than our parents did; that our standard of living improves over the course of our lifetimes; and that we can own our homes. It also means that regardless of background or origin, all of us have a chance to succeed. As Americans, we do not favor the idea that some people or groups are privileged by their background, while others are systematically blocked from success. Economic opportunity and social equality are thus twin pillars of the American belief system.

In the decades following the end of World War II—from 1945 to the early 1970s—the American Dream became a reality for millions of families and individuals in our society. People were able to buy homes, purchase new automobiles, take vacations, and see their standard of living steadily rise. At the same time, our society made strides toward improved social conditions for minorities and greater equality among groups of people. For these changes, many observers credit pressure from the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, labor unions, and other social organizations and movements, along with changes in public policy and a growing, prosperous economy. A better standard of living and a narrowing gap between rich and poor—together, these changes reinforced vital elements of the American credo. Many Americans assumed that material life would continue to improve indefi-

nately and that the economic and social gaps among groups would continue to narrow.

In the 1970s, however, the economy slowed down and began to stagnate. The standard of living began to fall, poverty began to increase, and membership in the middle class became more tenuous. Just to stay in the same place, many families had to adapt, as more women sought work outside the home, living spaces became smaller, and time for leisure activities and for families getting together was reduced as people worked harder for longer hours. The 1980s saw a return to some of the inequalities of the past, as measured by comparisons of the relative material positions of African and European Americans and by comparisons of women’s income with men’s. Many observers began to feel that the United States was losing ground in its struggle against social inequality.

The changes we are seeing in our society during the 1990s—stagnating living standards, increasing poverty, a precarious middle class, and a growing gap between rich and poor—are probably the result of the specific way that economic restructuring is taking place in the United States. Economic restructuring is one way in which corporations, businesses, bureaucracies, individuals, and various levels of government respond to the challenge of keeping the United States a preeminent nation in the emerging global economy. Restructuring includes a variety of strategies, policies, and practices—including corporate and government downsizing, deindustrialization, movement of production from the central city to the suburbs, and changes from a permanent to a contingent workforce, from local to global production, from

Fordist (mass assembly line) production to more flexible and decentralized production, and from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy. Together with other factors, including the increasing diversity of the American population, economic restructuring is giving a new shape to social and economic inequality in our society.

My goal in this book is to help you to make sense of these changes and to understand the basic theories, concepts, and findings associated with inequality in the United States today. Part I, on opportunity and inequality in the United States, explores what has been happening to the American Dream and looks particularly at the sources and meanings of this new shape of inequality.

## SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

*Strata* means layers, or hierarchy; *social stratification* is a process or system by which groups of people are arranged into a hierarchical social structure. Dimensions of power and powerlessness undergird this hierarchy and influence subsequent opportunities for rewards. Consequently, people have differential access to—and control over—prospects, rewards, and whatever is of value in society at any given time, based on their hierarchical positions, primarily because of social factors. Social stratification, an expression of social inequality, is so pervasive in American society that an entire field of sociology is devoted to its study.

Social-stratification systems are based primarily on either ascribed status or achieved status. *Ascribed status* is a social position typically designated or given to each person at birth. In a society with ascribed status, differential opportunities, rewards, privileges, and power are provided to individuals according to criteria fixed at birth. *Achieved status* is a social position gained as a result of ability or effort. This type of stratification is evident in all industrial societies, including the United States.

Given that social stratification is an expression of social inequality, how does inequality result, in turn, from social stratification? One leading scholar has proposed that inequality is produced

by two different kinds of matching processes: “The jobs, occupations, and social roles in society are first matched to ‘reward packages’ of unequal value”; then, individuals are sorted and matched to particular jobs, occupations, and social roles through training and other institutional processes (Grusky, 1994, p. 3). Both parts of this matching process have been the subject of much investigation in sociology, as many inquiries have probed these two questions (Fischer et al., 1996, p. 7): (1) What determines how much people get for performing various economic roles and tasks? (2) What social and institutional processes determine who gets ahead and who falls behind in the competition for positions of unequal value?

Other questions sociologists ask about stratification include the following: How is ascribed status constructed over time? What are the institutional processes and practices that shape ascriptive stratification? To what extent does an ascribed status circumscribe people’s opportunities and rewards? To what extent is achieved status fixed or open? What determines how and whether individuals are able to move through the occupational and wage structure in a system characterized by achieved status? When people can move through such a structure, how do they move? These and other questions are explored in Part II, on how social stratification is generated.

## Social Stratification in the United States

Ascriptive stratification based on gender is found in nearly every society, and racial and ethnic stratification is almost as widespread. Nevertheless, social stratification in the United States is based primarily on achieved status, at least in theory. When this nation was formed, the founders deliberately distinguished it from nations where life chances and social rank were determined by birth. A core element of the American credo is that life chances are determined largely by talent, skill, hard work, and achievement. We believe that everyone has a fair shot at whatever is valued or prized and that no individual or group is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged.

This belief does not mean that we expect everyone to achieve equal results; rather, we expect that everyone is starting with the same opportunities for achieving these different outcomes. Indeed, we tend to see differences in material success as the legitimate result of playing by the agreed-on rules. Although our national history is ambiguous about our implementation of social inequality, we normally take great exception when systemic and systematic differences in achievement clearly and directly result from public policy, varying or hidden rules, discrimination, or differential rewards for similar accomplishments. These pernicious factors produce what we think of as inequality.

Despite our egalitarian values and beliefs, social inequality has been an enduring fact of life and politics in the United States. Some groups of people have sufficient power—through family, neighborhood, school, or community—to maintain higher economic class positions and higher social status in American society. People in these groups have the ability to get and stay ahead in the competition for success. Further, social inequality has always been integrally bound up with three dimensions of social stratification: socioeconomic class, race and ethnicity, and gender. Divisions based on these three dimensions are deeply embedded in the social structures and institutions that define our lives, so these three constructs must be at the center of any analysis of social inequality. The integration of these constructs is not simple, however, because we lack both a common understanding of them and an agreement as to their significance in the structure of social inequality.

An example illustrates this lack of common ground. Whenever I ask my students what they mean by *class*, they say they are sure that classes exist in the United States and that a lot of economic inequality, privilege, and disadvantage results from class structure. However, they become much less certain when I ask them what determines class status. My most recent group of students suggested a number of ways to determine class status, including income, wealth, education, job, and neighborhood, as well as how many

members of a given family were working. Even when we focused on one criterion for class that is often used—income—they could not agree on how much income put people into which class. This example suggests the lack of common understanding about class. As this book shows, the difficulties involved in analyzing the influence of ethnicity (and race) and gender on social inequality probably are even greater than those for analyzing class. This analysis is more difficult because there is little agreement regarding the existence or significance of ethnic (and racial) and gender inequality.

### Dimensions of Inequality in the United States

Class, race and ethnicity, and gender shape the history, experiences, and opportunities of people in the United States. As a leading social theorist indicated, we should view class, race, and gender as different and interrelated, with interlocking levels of domination, not as discrete dimensions of stratification (Collins, 1990). Thus, even though the following discussion introduces class, race and ethnicity, and gender as separate concepts, many of the readings and discussions in this book examine these dimensions as simultaneous, interrelated, and interlocking means of configuring people's social relations and life opportunities.

**Class** A *class* is a group of people who share the same economic or social status, life chances, and outlook on life. A *class system* is a system of social stratification in which social status is determined by the ownership and control of resources and by the kinds of work people do. The two major sociological explanations of class derive from its two most influential contributors, Karl Marx and Max Weber. In Marx's theory, social classes are defined by their distinct relationship to the means of production—that is, by whether people own the means of production (the capitalists) or sell their labor to earn a living (the workers). People's role in social life and their place in society are fixed by



their place in the system of production. In Marx's theoretical perspective, the classes that dominate production also dominate other institutions in society, from schools and the mass media to the institutions that make and enforce rules.

German sociologist Max Weber also believed that divisions between capitalists and workers and their assigned classes were the driving force of social organization. For Weber, however, Marx's theory of social stratification was too strongly driven by the single motor of economics and by where an individual was positioned in the production process. In addition to a person's economic position, Weber included social status and *party* (i.e., coordinated political action) as different bases of power, independent of (but closely related to) economics. Weber's multidimensional perspective examines wealth, prestige, and power.

In the social sciences, the debate over class has not been whether classes exist; rather, essential theoretical perspectives flow from these two different ways (Marx's or Weber's) of understanding and constructing class. These two theoretical perspectives on class are fundamental to an understanding of social stratification and social inequality. Part III, on class, includes selections from the original work of Marx and Weber, and it also addresses some of the questions associated with class in the United States.

**Race and Ethnicity** Like class, race and ethnicity are important dimensions of social stratification and social inequality. Although the terms *race* and *ethnicity* are often used interchangeably, they do not refer to the same thing. Both concepts are complex, and both defy easy definition. In the past, *race* was usually defined as a category of people sharing genetically transmitted traits deemed significant by society. However, this simple view does not hold up when we take into consideration the complex biology of genetic inheritance, migration, intermarriage, and the resulting wide variation within so-called racial groups. Today, most social scientists view *race* as a far more subjective (and shifting) social category than the fixed definitions of the past, wherein people are labeled by themselves or by others as belonging to a group

based on some physical characteristic, such as skin color or facial features. Racial-formation theory, which emphasizes the shifting meanings and power relationships inherent in notions of race, defines *race* "as a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies" (Winant, 1994, p. 115). The concept of race, then, has both biological and social components. Examples of race that have been used in the past are Caucasian, Asian, and African.

The concept of ethnicity is closely related to that of race. An *ethnic group* can be defined as a category of people distinguished by their ancestry, nationality, traditions, or culture. Examples of ethnic groups in the United States are Puerto Ricans, Japanese Americans, Cuban Americans, Irish Americans, and Lebanese Americans. Ethnicity is a cultural and social construct, and people's ethnic categories may be either self-chosen or assigned by outsiders to the group. Because characteristics such as culture, traditions, religion, and language are less visible and more changeable than skin color or facial features, ethnicity is even more arbitrary and subjective than is race.

The distinction between race and ethnicity is important. The basis for the social construction of race is primarily (though not entirely) biological; for ethnicity, it is primarily (though not entirely) cultural and social. Race is usually visible to an observer; ethnicity is usually a guess. The historical discourse about race in the United States is charged with notions of difference, of superiority and inferiority, of domination and subordination. Ideas and practices surrounding race—especially the deeply embedded divisions between African Americans and Caucasian (European) Americans—go to the core of the American experience of social inequality. (Issues of social inequality centered on race and ethnicity are addressed more fully in Part IV of this book.)

**Gender** *Gender*, perhaps the oldest and deepest division in social life, may be defined as the set of social and cultural characteristics associated with biological sex—being female or male—in a particular society. Like race and ethnicity, gender is