



• Dennis Gilbert

# *The* American Class Structure

• In an Age  
of Growing  
Inequality

• Fifth Edition

---

# The American Class Structure

---

In an Age of Growing Inequality

---

FIFTH EDITION

**Dennis Gilbert**  
Hamilton College



WADSWORTH PUBLISHING COMPANY

I(T)P® An International Thomson Publishing Company

---

Belmont, CA • Albany, NY • Bonn • Boston • Cincinnati • Detroit • Johannesburg • London • Madrid  
Melbourne • Mexico City • New York • Paris • Singapore • Tokyo • Toronto • Washington

Publisher: Denise Simon  
Assistant Editor: Barbara Yien  
Marketing Manager: Chaun Hightower  
Project Editor: Jerilyn Emori  
Print Buyer: Karen Hunt  
Permissions Editor: Robert Kauser  
Production: Robin Gold/Forbes Mill Press  
Copy Editor: Robin Gold  
Cover Designer: Stuart Paterson/Image House Inc.  
Compositor: Forbes Mill Press/Wolf Creek Press  
Printer: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

COPYRIGHT © 1998 by Wadsworth Publishing Company  
A Division of International Thomson Publishing Inc.

The ITP logo is a registered trademark under license.

Printed in the United States of America  
3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

For more information, contact Wadsworth Publishing Company, 10 Davis Drive,  
Belmont, CA 94002, or electronically at <http://www.thomson.com/wadsworth.html>

International Thomson Publishing Europe  
Berkshire House 168-173  
High Holborn  
London, WC1V 7AA, England

International Thomson Editores  
Campos Eliseos 385, Piso 7  
Col. Polanco  
11560 México D.F. México

Thomas Nelson Australia  
102 Dodds Street  
South Melbourne 3205  
Victoria, Australia

International Thomson Publishing Asia  
221 Henderson Road  
#05-10 Henderson Building  
Singapore 0315

Nelson Canada  
1120 Birchmount Road  
Scarborough, Ontario  
Canada M1K 5G4

International Thomson Publishing Japan  
Hirakawacho Kyowa Building, 3F  
2-2-1 Hirakawacho  
Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102, Japan

International Thomson Publishing GmbH  
Königswinterer Strasse 418  
53227 Bonn, Germany

International Thomson Publishing Southern Africa  
Building 18, Constantia Park  
240 Old Pretoria Road  
Halfway House, 1685 South Africa

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gilbert, Dennis L.

The American class structure in an age of growing inequality /  
Dennis Gilbert. — 5th ed.

p. cm.

Updated ed. of: The American class structure. 4th ed. 1993.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-534-50520-1

1. Social classes—United States. 2. Equality—United States.
  3. Poverty—United States. 4. United States—Social conditions.
  5. United States—Economic conditions. I. Gilbert, Dennis L.
- American class structure. II. Title.

HN90.S6G54 1998

305.5'0973—dc21

97-40105



*This book is printed on acid-free recycled paper.*

---

---

---

---

## 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 Ph.D., then living cheaply in Mexico. His book, which helped define the emerging field of social stratification, remained in print for twenty-five 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. He 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 were 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 in the late-1970s, Kahl invited me to collaborate on a new version of *The American Class Structure*. He was then Professor of Sociology at Cornell, and I was his graduate student. 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 new 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 Kahl and I produced together, proved popular with a new generation of sociologists and sociology students. But when Wadsworth Publishing asked us to start thinking about a fifth edition, Kahl, who had by then retired to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, indicated that he would rather spend his time listening to opera than reading page proofs again. And since he would not be contributing to the fifth edition, he asked that his name be taken off the cover.

Although there is now only one official author, the authorial "I" reverts to "we" after this preface. Of course, most 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 previous editions seemed perfectly natural. That said, I want to stress that I bear sole responsibility for every word included in this edition.

Readers of previous editions will find much that is familiar here. There is also much that is new. Every chapter has been updated, with particular emphasis on change in the class system. This edition gives expanded treatment to gender and race. It includes fresh material on jobs, wages, income, wealth, poverty, residential patterns, social mobility, campaign contributions and many other subjects.

A new theme runs through the book: rising class inequalities. Data on trends in earnings, income, wealth, jobs and related variables reveal a consistent pattern of growing inequality since the early 1970s (in sharp contrast to the broadly shared prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s). The text repeatedly returns to a deceptively simple question: Why is this happening?

Like its predecessors, this 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 derived from classical theory, emphasizes selected empirical studies, and focuses on the socioeconomic core of the class system. Gender and race are treated in relation to class, rather than as parallel dimensions of stratification. This approach reveals that the experience of class is inextricably bound up with gender and race. For example, studies show that a married woman's sense of class identity reflects her husband's job, her own job, but also her attitude toward gender roles. Residential segregation by class is increasing in the United States, but so is segregation by race. One result has been the growth of affluent black neighborhoods.

In earlier prefaces, Kahl and I thanked many friends, colleagues and students whose support made *The American Class Structure* a better book. I want to add my thanks to those who contributed to this edition. Tim Wickham-Crowley and two anonymous readers wrote thoughtful critiques of the last edition. Steve Rose (known to students of stratification for his revealing income posters) was generous with his time, resources, and ideas. Bill and Weslie Janeway shared their personal insights into the class system. Bill Hadden, Philip Klinkner, Steve Rose, and Nina Serafino

read the manuscript in whole or part, offered valuable suggestions, and saved me from embarrassing errors. Chris Ingersoll designed the charts for Chapter 1. Without the help of research assistants Rebecca Pierce Bowmann and Julie Thomas and Hamilton Sociology Department secretaries Sally Carman and Carole Freeman, this long delayed book would have taken even longer to produce. Of course, I owe my largest debt of gratitude to Joe Kahl, a fine teacher, supportive colleague, and good friend.

Dennis Gilbert

---

---

---

---

# Contents

## **Chapter 1 The Dimensions of Class 1**

Karl Marx	3
Max Weber	8
Nine Variables	11
The Variables as a System	14
What Are Social Classes?	15
An American Class Structure	17
Is the American Class Structure Changing?	19
Suggested Readings	21

## **Chapter 2 Position and Prestige 23**

W. Lloyd Warner: Prestige Classes in Yankee City	25
Prestige Class as a Concept	28
Are There Six Classes?	29
Class Structure of the Metropolis	32
Prestige of Occupations	38
Occupations and Social Classes	41
Conclusion: Perception of Rank and Strata	43
Suggested Readings	45

## **Chapter 3 Social Class, Occupation, and Social Change 47**

Middletown: 1890 and 1924	48
Middletown Revisited	50
Industrialization and the Transformation of the National Class Structure	53
The National Upper Class	54
The Industrial Working Class	56
The New Middle Class	59
National Occupational System	61
The Transformations of the American Occupational Structure	64
From Agricultural to Postindustrial Society	66
Women Workers in Postindustrial Society	70
Transformation of the Black Occupational Structure	72
Wages in the Age of Growing Inequality	74
Growing Inequality of Wages: Why?	77
Harrison and Bluestone: New Corporate Strategies	79
Frank and Cook: Winner Take All	80
Conclusion	82
Suggested Readings	84

## **Chapter 4 Wealth and Income 85**

The Income Parade	86
Lessons from the Parade	90
The Distribution of Income	92
Sources of Income	94
Income Shares	96
Taxes and Transfers: The Government as Robin Hood?	97
How Many Poor?	98
Women and the Distribution of Household Income	99
The Distribution of Wealth	101
Trends in the Distribution of Wealth	104
Trends in the Distribution of Income	106
Income Dynamics	107
News from Another Planet	109
Changing Federal Tax Rates	111
Conclusion	112
Suggested Readings	113



## **Chapter 5 Socialization, Association, Lifestyles, and Values 115**

Children's Conception of Social Class	116
Kohn: Class and Socialization	117
School and Marriage	121
Marriage Styles	123
Blue-Collar Marriages and Middle-Class Models	127
Informal Association Among Adults	131
Formal Associations	134
Separate Lives	135
Suggested Readings	139

## **Chapter 6 Social Mobility: The Structural Context 141**

How Much Mobility?	143
Social Mobility of Women	145
Changing Causes of Mobility	147
Trends in Social Mobility	150
Trends in Black Mobility	154
Conclusion	155
Suggested Readings	156

## **Chapter 7 Family, Education, and Career 157**

Blau and Duncan: Analyzing Mobility Models	159
Jencks on Equality	163
Who Goes to College?	168
College and the Careers of Women and Minorities	171
Conclusions	174
Suggested Readings	175

## **Chapter 8 Elites, the Capitalist Class, and Political Power 177**

Three Perspectives on Power	178
Hunter: Power in Atlanta	179
The Reputational Method and Its Critics	180
Dahl: Power in New Haven	181
The Decisional Method and Its Critics	182
Domhoff: New Haven Restudied	183
Comparative Community Power Studies	185
Mills: The National Power Elite	187
Mills, His Critics, and the Problem of Elite Cohesion	189
Pluralism, Strategic Elites, and Cohesion	192

Power Elite or Ruling Class?	195
The National Capitalist Class: Social Basis	202
Mechanisms of Capitalist-Class Power: Participation in Government	204
Money and Politics	207
Business Lobbies	210
Policy-Planning Groups	212
Indirect Mechanisms of Capitalist-Class Influence	213
The Capitalist-Class Resurgence	215
Conclusions	216
Suggested Readings	217

## **Chapter 9 Class Consciousness and Class Conflict 219**

Marx and the Origins of Class Consciousness	220
Richard Centers and Class Identification	222
Correlates of Class Identification	224
Married Women and Class Identification	224
Class Identification, Political Opinion, and Voting	225
The Origins of Working-Class Consciousness in Comparative Perspective	226
Bott: Frames of Reference	227
Elections and the Democratic Class Struggle	229
Class, Ethnicity, and Politics	233
Class and Political Participation	236
Trends in Class Partisanship	237
Class Conflict and the Labor Movement	238
The Postwar Armistice	241
Labor in Decline	244
Conclusions	247
Suggested Readings	248

## **Chapter 10 The Poor, the Underclass, and Public Policy 251**

The Beginnings of Welfare: Roosevelt	253
Rediscovery of Poverty: Kennedy and Johnson	254
The Official Definition of Poverty	256
How Many Poor?	259
Who Are the Poor?	260
Trends in Poverty	262
The Underclass and Persistent Poverty	264
The Mystery of Rising Poverty Rates	269
Welfare Reform: From Nixon to Bush	275
Restructuring Poverty Programs: The 1996 Law	276
Conclusion	279
Suggested Readings	281

**Chapter 11 The American Class Structure and Growing Inequality 283**

How Many Classes Are There? 284

The Capitalist Class 286

The Upper-Middle Class 288

The Middle Class 288

The Working Class 289

The Working Poor 290

The Underclass 290

Growing Inequality 291

Why? 294

Straws in the Wind 296

**Bibliography 297****Name Index 317****Subject Index 321****Credits 331**

---

# 1

---

## The Dimensions of Class

*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 the women (who were given priority over men for places in the lifeboats), 3 percent of the first-class passengers drowned, compared with 16 percent of the second-class and 45 percent of the third-class passengers. Of the victims in first class, all but one had refused to abandon ship when given the opportunity. On the other hand, third-class passengers had been ordered to stay below deck, some of them at the point of a gun (Lord 1955: 107, cited in Hollingshead and Redlich 1958: 6).

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 data compare people at the bottom, middle, and top of the class structure. They show, among other things, that people at the bottom are more frequently the victims of violent crime, less likely to be in good health, and more likely to feel lonely. Those at the top are healthier, safer, and more likely to send their children to college; it is no wonder that they are, on average, happier with their lives and more conservative in their political outlooks.

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 or more influence or more prestige than their neighbors. 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 many of the political activities of people in society flowed from their class interests. As Hamilton said, the rich sought social stability to preserve their advantages, but the poor worked for social change that would bring them a larger share of the world's rewards.

<sup>115</sup> This book is an analysis of the class structure of the United States today. We examine the distribution of income, prestige, power, and other stratification variables among the different classes in the country. 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.

To talk about a complex system and show how one part of it influences another, we must have a separate concept or word for each main aspect and

**TABLE 1-1** Life Chances by Social Class<sup>a</sup>

	<i>Lower Class</i>	<i>Middle Class</i>	<i>Upper-Middle and Upper Class</i>
In excellent health <sup>b</sup>	28%	37%	53%
Victims of violent crime per 1000 population <sup>c</sup>	50	29	21
Psychological impairment index (average = 100) <sup>d</sup>	217	62	21
Feel lonely frequently or sometimes <sup>e</sup>	46%	35%	27%
Obesity in native-born women <sup>f</sup>	52%	43%	27%
Children, 18–24, in college <sup>g</sup>	15%	38%	54%
Dissatisfied with personal life <sup>h</sup>	22%	15%	5%
Favor liberal economic policies <sup>i</sup>	48%	38%	28%

<sup>a</sup>Classes defined by income<sup>b</sup>Self-assessment, U.S. Public Health Service 1990: 164.<sup>c</sup>U.S. Justice 1990: 239.<sup>d</sup>Moderate to serious symptoms. Index calculated for this table from Strole et al. 1978: 308.<sup>e</sup>DeStefano 1990: 33.<sup>f</sup>Burnight and Marden 1967: 81.<sup>g</sup>U.S. Census 1986a: 141.<sup>h</sup>Gallup 1988: 234.<sup>i</sup>In 1984 survey, favored increased federal spending on at least three of five social programs (food stamps, social security, Medicare, public schools, job creation). Center for Political Studies, "American National Election Study, 1984" (computed for this table).

a special method for estimating or measuring it. We begin by examining two key theories of stratification, to identify the major facets of the subject as a guide to concept formation. The writings of Karl Marx and Max Weber established an intellectual framework that strongly influenced subsequent scholars. (See the Suggested Readings at the end of the chapter for other important theorists.)

## KARL MARX

Although the discussion of stratification goes back to ancient philosophy, modern attempts to formulate a systematic theory of class differences began with the work of Karl Marx 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, emphasized 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, capitalists, or the *bourgeoisie*, are a class consisting of the owners of the means of production, such as mines or factories. Likewise, workers, or the *proletariat*, are a class consisting of those who must sell their labor power to the owners of the means of production in order 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. Small business owners lose out in competition with big business owners, creating a small bourgeoisie of monopoly capitalists. In a parallel fashion, machines get more sophisticated and do the work that used to be done by skilled workers, so gradations within the proletariat fade in significance.

But notice that these are statements about trends, about long-run tendencies. At any given moment, distinctions within each class that stem from historical residues—even from markedly different earlier epochs—may influence the situation in important ways that shape behavior. Sometimes Marx called these subdivisions *fractions* of a class, and sometimes he seemed to consider them as momentarily separate classes. Generally his 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 history analyzing long-term trends.

Why did Marx look to production for the basis of social classes? 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 wages down 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 commercial and industrial 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.

Unlike many later writers who believed that the level of technology by itself was the crucial determinant of social organization, Marx emphasized that modes of production entail patterns of both technology and social relations and that each can vary independently of the other. An agrarian society in which each producer cultivated land that he owned himself would not represent a feudal mode of production. Likewise, Marx viewed communism as a new mode of production, which could be built on the industrial technology already developed under the capitalist mode of production.

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, military and political power was monopolized by the landowners; with the rise of modern capitalism, political power was captured by the bourgeoisie when they gained control of the national government. 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 was employed to crush the early labor movement, a pattern that was repeated a little later in the United States. As Marx expressed it in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848): "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx 1979: 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*. Marx argued 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 words, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx 1979: 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 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, guildmaster 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. (Marx 1979: 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 implied the emergence of new classes and class relationships. The most serious political conflicts develop when the interests of a rising class clash with 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 creates a new epoch; thus, change is explained by an internal dynamic that Marx called *the dialectic*.

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 1979: 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. These changes were resisted by the feudal landlords, who felt their own interests threatened by those of the bourgeoisie. The result was a series of political conflicts (the French