

**POWERED
POWER
AND
EQUITY**

— AN INTRODUCTION TO —
SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

William McCord & Arline McCord

POWER AND EQUITY

**An Introduction to
Social Stratification**

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To
William Maxwell McCord
and
Elinor Mary McCord

PREFACE

“How does your father earn money?” I said to the little girl who sat next to me on a school bus in Arizona. “Stocks and bonds?” I added, helpfully.

The girl wore no shoes. Her dress was in rags. Her face, if I had had the knowledge to recognize it, was emaciated from malnutrition.

“Welfare,” she said.

My incredibly naive question emerged from the stunted mentality of a spoiled upper-class child. My ancestors included distinguished politicians and writers; my father had once headed a powerful New York bank, and his father had presided over a large railroad. Servants ran our house; prime ribs of beef materialized on our table even during the worst days of war-time rationing; family names regularly appeared in Who’s Who; and “everyone” assumed that we would be listed in The Blue Book, attend the Junior Assembly, go to an Ivy League college, swim at the country club, and enter the Junior League or the “Old Pueblo Club.” Most importantly, money, money, money smoothed the way of our pampered lives.

The little girl on the bus, “Red” she was nicknamed, lived on charity (there were no food stamps in the 1940s), suffered from a club foot, which her father could not afford to have treated, and existed in a rat-infested, tarred shanty.

She went on to become first in our high-school class. I limped in 550 out of 1,000, having turned down my parents' offer to send me to a private school.

Since that time of innocence, I have learned that not all people live off "stocks and bonds." I have experienced the prisons, ghettos, and dilapidated schools of the American system. I have learned that wealth, not merit, buys the good things of life: abundant food, a good education, political influence, proper medical care, and even a dignified burial.

Is this equitable? Should we allocate power in the fashion we do? Should I, a lump-headed football player in high school, receive more privileges than "Red," the crippled poor girl who accompanied me on the school bus? Can we alleviate the unfairness of American life? These are the fundamental subjects of this book.

Throughout this work we will be concerned with power: the differential ability of people to command the obedience of others, to influence them, or to secure a high proportion of the resources of their society. This differentiation in power has been an enduring element in human history.

In Part I, we are particularly concerned with five basic types of inequality in power: (1) slavery, as exemplified in ancient Rome and in America; (2) the caste system, as practiced in Hindu and some Moslem states until it was officially attacked by colonial powers and by the legal prohibitions of newly independent nations; (3) serfdom, as witnessed in such societies as those of medieval Europe and nineteenth-century Russia, in which people were differentiated by their ownership of land and by military prowess; (4) class distinctions in industrialized nations whereby people are differentiated primarily by the degree to which they own the means of production and the wealth that flows from such dominance; and (5) bureaucratic inequality, a new form of social stratification that has emerged as characteristic of such diverse postindustrial nations as the United States, England, and the Soviet Union. We are concerned with the reasons why each of these systems emerged as well as the reasons for their continuance, erosion, or disappearance.

It is also important to consider the philosophical positions of various thinkers who have questioned whether or not inequality is inevitable. On the one hand, there are those who believe that social inequality is an inevitable part of the human condition and necessary for the survival of civilization. In these ranks, one should count such distinguished figures as Plato, Aristotle, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, José Ortega y Gasset, and Sigmund Freud. On the other hand, some intellectuals—such as Pierre Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin, Karl Marx, Martin Buber, and John Galbraith—have argued that inequality could be abolished if statesmen paid more attention to the public interest or, more radically, if they engaged in establishing socialist states, communes, or kibbutzim.

In an attempt to provide some evidence for the examination of these issues, we turn in Part II to an examination of the actual impact of inequality and differentials of power in America. Here, we are concerned with a variety of studies that illustrate the specific effect of social inequality on opportunities for higher education, death in war, infant mortality, mental disorder, crime, values, and life styles. In addition, we must pay close attention to racism and sexism, their intimate relation with the class system, and their impact upon Americans.

We are also concerned with various strategies to end inequality since, in recent decades, there have been many attempts to reduce some of the inequalities in American society. The particular measures we examine include the "War on Poverty"; the provision of new legal protections for the poor; extensions of public education and medical care; and attempts to "mobilize" the poor into political action.

In Part III, the philosophical arguments that surround the problems of power and equity in any society are presented. Most Americans believe that equality of opportunity in the pursuit of happiness is a desirable objective. Yet, some intellectuals have attacked this goal as unattainable or, if reachable, as undesirable.

We will examine the lines of argument of the following: the elitists, who believe that inequality is just and necessary for the preservation of a good society; the liberals, who wish to protect individual freedom and provide equality of opportunity; the libertarians, who regard liberty as their foremost goal and are willing to tolerate inequalities as long as people are "entitled" to their privileges; and the egalitarians, who wish to see all people share alike in the goods and resources of this world.

Our own biases affect this enterprise. It should be known, for example, that we believe that every human being is entitled to life, liberty, and the property he or she earns. Further, each person should be guaranteed a basic annual income, receive health care, have some form of shelter, and clothing. Each should receive an education that fits his or her fullest potential. We believe that every person should be offered full equality of opportunity to achieve goods beyond this level.

There are, of course, means to eliminate the more blatant and arbitrary inequalities that remain in modern society. Yet, we recognize that inequity and inequalities in wealth, status, and power are inevitable aspects of human life.

W. M.
A. M.

INTRODUCTION: POWER AND EQUITY

Wherever people have lived together, one of their primary concerns has been the relative distribution of resources. Power and privilege have always been accorded some people in every group. Even the most cursory reading of history or contemporary affairs shows the pervasiveness of inequality:

1. In primitive societies, men generally own women as pieces of property who have *no rights* and who, in some societies such as ancient India, are obliged to kill themselves upon the death of their husband.¹
2. In some simple societies where food is scarce, strong children grab food from the mouths of those who are weakened by age or *infirmary*.²
3. In caste-ridden nations, orthodox believers in supernatural predestination drink a mixture of cow's urine and dung to "purify" themselves if they have been "defiled" by the sight of an untouchable.³
4. In ancient Rome, patricians could kill slaves without punishment,⁴ and centuries later, in the American South, whites whipped slaves for playing drums at night.⁵

5. In nineteenth-century Russia, serfs who appealed to government officials because of maltreatment were banished and forced to walk 3,000 miles to Siberia.⁶

Industrialization modified many of these forms of inequality. In some cases, modernization has resulted in the abolition of a particular type of inequality, such as slavery. This does not mean, however, that the modern world has eradicated inequality, for humankind appears infinitely ingenious in creating new forms of human subjugation.

In the contemporary United States, for example, the top 20 percent of the nation's families receive 41 percent of all personal income while the bottom 20 percent receive less than 5 percent.⁷ While wealthy Americans enjoy a privileged style of life and leisure, the poor suffer such indignities as the following:

1. In 1965, poor children in Mississippi received less than 32 cents a day for food.⁸
2. In the 1960's many children in Washington, D.C., attended school without food.⁹
3. At the same time, the food allowance for welfare recipients in the nation's capital amounted to 17.5 cents per person per meal.¹⁰
4. For lack of medical care, twice as many black as white infants died in the 1960s. If a black male survived, he could expect to die seven years earlier than his white counterpart.¹¹
5. In 1967, because of educational discrimination, 80 percent of intelligent males and 86 percent of intelligent females who came from the lower class in Wisconsin did not graduate from college.¹²
6. American women spent enough money on cosmetics to double all the national budgets of black Africa.¹³
7. In 1976, the richest 10 percent of the American population still received fifteen times the income that the poorest 10 percent gets.¹⁴

These are only a few of the results of various types of *social stratification*, a system of human organization in which one group enjoys more power, privilege, wealth, or material goods than another. In one way or another, all contemporary societies exhibit this inequality. Within the borders of a nation such as the United States, particular groups—lower-class blacks, Puerto Ricans, or Chicanos—lose in the race for material bounties, housing, education, and even life itself. Internationally, a favored handful of nations in North America, Western Europe, and Asia enjoy the benefits of industrialization while much of the rest of the world starves.

In this book we address some of the fundamental issues raised by

social stratification throughout the world. We are concerned with three general problems.

1. *What is the nature and source of inequality in human affairs?* Why does a society develop a particular form for distributing power—say, slavery, serfdom, or bureaucracy? What accounts for the demise of a special type of inequality? These are essentially historical and empirical questions that can be answered by the resources of social science.

2. *Is inequality inevitable?* Some social thinkers, including defenders of slavery such as Aristotle and John Calhoun, political conservatives like José Ortega y Gasset and T. S. Eliot, and social scientists from Herbert Spencer to Edgar Z. Friedenberg, believe that social ordering and ranking is (or should be) an inevitable part of the social fabric. Other social philosophers, from Jean Jacques Rousseau to John Rawls, Condorcet to Marx, Babeuf to Kropotkin, have argued that inequalities of power and privilege are artificial, unneeded, unjust appendages of our civilization. To correct the stratification systems of their time, slaves revolted in Rome, Frenchmen launched a revolution, Zionists created kibbutzim, and socialists throughout the world have sought to establish classless societies. Are they pursuing a chimera or is it possible that a society without discrimination, without ranks, and without inequalities in power might be created? This issue is at the heart of the many political and social debates of our time.

Closely related to the question of the inevitability of stratification is that of equity; that is, if the hierarchical ordering of people is inevitable, then a third problem must be confronted.

3. *What would be an equitable social order?* Throughout history people have portrayed social orders different from their own that would come closer to their concept of justice. The content of these visions has differed drastically: Comte, Saint-Simon, and Fourier, who wrote during the beginning stages of industrialization, depicted scientifically managed communities run by a technocratic elite;¹⁵ Babeuf and Proudhon fought for an egalitarian society where classes and the power of the state no longer prevailed;¹⁶ Marx and Engels believed that the inevitable drift of history would create a society in which each person was his or her own master and each would receive material rewards according to his or her needs;¹⁷ Spencer and Nietzsche wished for a society that recognized biological differences and allowed the superior person to pursue his or her interests untrammelled by the petty desires of the masses.¹⁸

History has swept some of these depictions of equity into obscurity. Other conceptions of power and equity—most notably those of Marx, Mao, Hitler, and Mussolini—have, for good or ill, changed the course of humankind's development.¹⁹ Despite the wishes of those who rule a particular status quo, the demand for equity cannot be ignored. Although an

outsider may view a particular society as unfair, the majority of its citizens must believe in it for the sake of internal cohesion. Intricate religious, political, economic, and philosophical justifications have been elaborated to preserve a particular brand of inequality.

The question of equity remains open, however, and even in present-day America, a land that proclaims the ideal of equal opportunity, there remains much debate. Ayn Rand proclaims the sacredness of wealth;²⁰ Robert Nozick argues that each person is "entitled" to whatever wealth he or she may receive;²¹ and B. F. Skinner longs for a perfect society of people conditioned by "supervisors."²² In contrast, Michael Harrington issues pleas for socialism;²³ Herbert Gans wishes to create more equality among people;²⁴ and John Rawls foresees no conditions that justify any form of inequality except for the general benefit of all.²⁵ Obviously, the issue of how power and privilege should be justly settled in the modern world is far from being resolved.

Before confronting the multifaceted issues involved in this debate, let us establish a few basic definitions of the concepts important to our discussion.

Basic Concepts of Social Stratification

An individual's position in the stratification system potently affects almost every aspect of his or her life: dress, eating habits, education, physical health, outlook on life, as well as the very ability to live. By *stratification system* we mean the hierarchical ordering of people in a society differentiated according to their power, privilege or status. A collectivity of people who occupy similar positions in the hierarchical order constitutes a *stratum*. Most American sociologists have been interested primarily in one form of social stratification: the social-class system that dominates modern societies. By *social classes* we mean groups of people identified on the basis of their relationship to the economic market who have differential access to wealth, power, and certain styles of life.

Although debated by some social scientists,²⁶ we believe that every society creates some form of social stratification. There are two prerequisites for the appearance of a stratification system: (1) differentiation of the population along some dimension with a degree of permanence and (2) a system of rewards attached to the specific tasks performed by the different individuals or groups. However, the exact nature of the stratification system to be found in a society depends upon the state of its technological development and its prevailing cultural ideology.

Varieties of Social Stratification

Distinct varieties of social stratification have developed in each of three technologically different types of human society.

SIMPLE SOCIETIES

Simple societies are those in which hunting and gathering techniques are used for survival. In these societies, three types of social stratification prevail.

1. *Equalitarianism*, a minimal hierarchical organization, exists only in a handful of small societies where food and other resources are distributed among the members of the group on the basis of their desires and needs. Among the Tasaday of the Philippines²⁷ and the Andaman Islanders,²⁸ two examples of this type of stratification, group members share food and tend not to compete with one another. Such societies enjoy an abundance of resources. With only a vestige of a social-class system as we know it, such people do, however, accord honor and prestige to one another on the basis of skills such as hunting, utility as arbiters in familial disputes, or generosity in distributing food.²⁹

2. *Anarchy** occurs when neither government nor law inhibits the use of brute strength, a situation that exists in those simple societies where food is extraordinarily rare. Members of the Ik tribe of Uganda³⁰ do not help each other; on the contrary, they steal food whenever possible, abandon children if they prove cumbersome, and kill the aged and infirm. The Ik's social stratification is based simply on the supremacy of the physically strong, and finding food is the imperative of their lives.

3. *Patriarchy*, where the father is ruler of the family, predominates in many simple societies where food is scarce and the skill of the male hunter is valued. Among the Kalahari Bushmen of Africa,³¹ for example, harsh desert conditions have created a society in which the strongest males rule and in which all men dominate women. The men receive honor as hunters and are quick to eliminate those who are too weak to follow their nomadic wanderings.

*This term should, of course, not be confused with *anarchism*, the political theory that all systems of government and law are harmful and prevent individuals from reaching their fullest development.

AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

Agrarian societies, where people live primarily on what they produce from their gardening and cultivation of the land, are associated with three other types of social stratification.

1. *Slavery*, a situation in which one person is the legal property of another, has existed in every agrarian society. In settled agricultural communities or large plantations, slaves became an asset in production rather than simply more mouths to feed. Economic surpluses produced in agrarian nations have commonly allowed for military expeditions during which captives were taken who were made slaves.³²

2. The *caste* system, particularly as practiced in India, is based on the assumption that each person is preordained a place and occupation in society at birth. Contact between persons of the different strata is "impure," and intermarriage between castes is forbidden. Even the most trivial acts of life—such as sipping water or eating—are governed by particular rules for each caste.³³ The Indian caste system derives its authority from the Hindu belief in *karma*, the opinion that each person's soul follows a prescribed destiny governed by that individual's actions in a presumed previous life.

3. *Estate* systems, best symbolized by feudal European society, have appeared in some agrarian regions.³⁴ In such a system, people are assigned to their strata according to their birth, military strength, or land holdings. Each stratum has specific legal rights in relation to the others, as well as various privileges. For example, the lords of medieval Europe provided military protection to their serfs in return for a portion of the serfs' produce. Estate systems have blossomed during periods of social turmoil, such as the disintegration of the Roman Empire, where security could be assured only by allying oneself with the most powerful local lord, who could protect one within his fortress.

Each of these different forms of social stratification allows for some degree of *social mobility*, a situation in which individuals or groups rise above or fall from the stratum to which they have been assigned by birth. Even in India, subcastes (although not individuals) may move upward in the caste system by achieving increased wealth and education and by changing their rituals to conform with those of the higher caste.³⁵ In feudal Europe, urban merchants achieved the status of lord by financing military expeditions.³⁶

In areas of the globe where industrialism has superseded agrarian forms of production, the distinctions between master and slave, hunter and the weak, noble and serf, have given way to new types of social stratification.

INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

In those societies where machine energy has replaced human and animal energy as the primary source of economic production, an entirely new set of *social classes* in the modern sense of that term has been created. With the advent of industrialism, in seventeenth-century Europe, two important social classes appeared: the *bourgeoisie*, merchants and industrialists who owned the means of production, and the *proletariat*, former peasants who had become workers in factories. A variety of theories emerged concerning the role of these social classes.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their historic *Communist Manifesto* argued that the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were fundamentally opposed, and that contradictions within the capitalist form of economic development would result in a classless society; that is, a society in which everyone contributed according to his ability and received rewards according to his needs. Marxism postulated a growth in *class consciousness*, a recognition of one's location in the class structure by persons who share similar economic positions. Marx and Engels viewed history as an outgrowth of *class conflict*, an opposition between those who owned the means of production and those who labored for the owners, which would end only with the establishment of a communist society.³⁷

Max Weber, the great German sociologist, on the other hand, viewed class differences in modern society as based on considerations that extended beyond the economic realm.³⁸ In Weber's opinion, three criteria were used to differentiate people in modern society: *class* (power, based on one's relationship to the means of production); *status* differences, based on esteem given to individuals because of their membership in an hereditary aristocracy or their possession of special skills or knowledge; and *party* power, derived from one's dominance over a political, legal, or administrative system.

Recent writers such as Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis, and Wilbert Moore have argued that inequality is inherent in any society and that the particular rewards a society gives to its members are the result of their "functional" utility.³⁹ Critically important social positions must be filled with properly talented people who are, in turn, rewarded with more money, prestige, or power. Critics of this theory argue that it merely glorifies the existing class system, and that little evidence can be provided which clearly demonstrates that the members of the upper stratum in modern societies actually *deserve* more wealth, power, or prestige because of their contributions to the welfare of the whole society.⁴⁰

Today's sociologists have also debated the political consequences of the new system of social stratification ushered in by industrialism. Ger-

hard Lenski maintains that “the appearance of mature industrial societies marks the first significant reversal in the age old evolutionary trend toward ever increasing inequality.”⁴¹ Lenski views the development of industrialized nations as a prelude to political democracy. Other writers—most notably Floyd Hunter and C. Wright Mills—have contended that industrial societies have produced a new type of *power elite*, an intertwined group of business executives, political leaders, and military administrators who control the destiny of modern nations.⁴²

Whatever their political persuasion, few sociologists deny that a distinctly stratified class system exists in the United States and in other industrialized nations, the impact of which on every facet of life has been fully documented.

The Impact of the Class System

Whether people are consciously aware of their societal placement or not, their *objective* location in the stratification system has many important implications for their lives. Objective location of individuals has been studied by social scientists through analyses of indicators such as income, education, occupation, power (that is, the ability to influence the alternatives open to others) or esteem (that is, the prestige accorded to an individual).

Americans, for example, have traditionally believed that education can overcome the handicap of a lower-class position in society. In contrast to this prevailing belief, most studies indicate that one’s social-class position rather than one’s intelligence has a powerful effect upon educational attainment. A study by William Sewell and Vimal Shah recorded that males of high intelligence have three times the chance of graduating from college if they came from the upper classes than if they came from the lower classes, as measured by their fathers’ occupations.⁴³

Clearly, social class correlates strongly with the possession of political power in modern-day America. Donald R. Mathews and William Domhoff have shown that only 4 percent of politically powerful individuals in the nation were raised in a lower-class environment, whereas most high government officials (such as cabinet officers) come from the highest classes.⁴⁴

Social class also correlates with the mental and physical health of America’s population. Severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia have been found to be most prevalent in the lowest social classes.⁴⁵ The same pattern holds for physical health, mortality rates being higher

among the lower than the upper classes. During the Vietnam War twice as many men from the lower, compared to the upper, classes were killed,⁴⁶ since infantrymen come overwhelmingly from the lower class. In deaths from any type of disease, the lower class in America exceeds the upper class in ratios ranging from 2:1 to 1.3:1.⁴⁷

As industrial economies have matured, and as the creation of new positions has allowed many individuals to become upwardly mobile, a variety of new social classes have emerged.⁴⁸ Upwardly mobile persons include party functionaries in socialist nations, as well as industrial managers, professionals (particularly lawyers) and clerical and sales people in industrial societies in general. These groups derive their power and income primarily from their control over or participation in *bureaucracies*, formalized hierarchical organizations of people with specialized tasks directed toward specific goals. In fact, new *service classes*, or people devoted to providing "help" to others rather than producing food or industrial products, have displaced both agricultural workers and industrial workers as the major social classes in the United States today.⁴⁹

The emergence of new groups of workers has led many social commentators to argue that the industrially advanced nations of Western Europe, the United States, Russia, and Japan are entering a new stage of social stratification; that is, a postindustrial as opposed to a simple agricultural or merely industrialized society.

Social Stratification in Postindustrial Societies

In postindustrial societies the majority of the labor force is engaged in the provision of services: technical and professional workers increase in number, and scientific knowledge becomes crucially important in the direction of economic, political, and social affairs.⁵⁰

New systems of social stratification not necessarily based upon the possession of wealth are created. Some social scientists have argued, for example, that a *managerial class* (a group of administrators of large economic organizations) has emerged that possesses power independent of those who technically own the means of production.⁵¹ Communist nations, dedicated to the ideal of equalitarianism, have produced bureaucratic administrators who, in effect, dominate the society.⁵² *Technocrats*—specialized technicians, scientists, and professionals—have also proliferated at an amazing rate in postindustrial societies. In addition, the ranks of the lower *white-collar* class, such as salespeople and clericals, and

other nonmanual occupations have drastically expanded.⁵³

The changes in the social stratification systems of postindustrial societies have prompted some writers to envision a new society. Michael Young, for example, has written a fable on the rise of *meritocracy*, a type of utopian society in which everyone receives a place in life according to his or her measured intelligence.⁵⁴ Ralf Dahrendorf believes that we are entering a *postcapitalist* era where ownership of property no longer is a prerequisite to membership in the upper classes; rather, those who exercise control in the political and economic realms now constitute a governing class.⁵⁵ Daniel Bell foresees a period in which those who have knowledge will increasingly gain power.⁵⁶ Utopians, such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Herbert Marcuse, Melford Spiro, and Paul Goodman, foresee different futures for postindustrial civilization ranging from the organization of society along “communal” lines, such as the Israeli kibbutzim, to the supremacy of “temporary,” technocratic dictatorships.⁵⁷ These changes in postindustrial society have stirred intense debates about the philosophical implications of stratification.

Philosophical Aspects of Social Stratification

From Plato to Marx to current thinkers, social philosophers have considered the issue of social justice. Some seek a society based on *equality*, or the complete leveling of wealth, prestige, and rank; others have emphasized *equity*, or the distribution of rewards on the basis of the individual's contribution to society. Philosophers of social stratification may be roughly divided into three categories.

1. *Conservatives* generally wish to keep things as they are, viewing inequality as the natural condition of humankind. Aristotle considered social inequality as an inevitable condition of humankind and went so far as to defend slavery.⁵⁸ Conservatives assume that if each person receives a fair share from society, each should get exactly what he or she deserves in wealth, power, or prestige on the basis of his or her contribution.⁵⁹ Little consideration is given to providing resources to those who cannot contribute or to establishing the basis of a fair return.

A variety of conservatism labeled “libertarianism,” or the political belief that everyone should have the greatest liberty possible, has recently been proposed by Robert Nozick. Nozick argues that there is no justification for believing that the state should seek greater equality among people. Redistribution of power or wealth is, in his opinion, a