


Third Edition

# **Social Stratification and Inequality**

Class Conflict in Historical and  
Comparative Perspective

Harold R. Kerbo



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**CLASS CONFLICT IN  
HISTORICAL AND  
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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**THIRD EDITION**

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**For Kathy, Nicole, and Emily**

## **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND INEQUALITY**

**Class Conflict in Historical and Comparative Perspective**

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# PREFACE

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Changing only the dates, I can begin this preface as I did in the second edition: The first half of the 1990s 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 increased considerably. The United States, in fact, moved from an average level of income inequality compared to other industrial nations to the position of highest income inequality. As we will see with updated figures, primarily in Chapter 2, the first half of the 1990s provided no alteration in this trend of growing inequality. As in the 1980s, part of this change occurred because the middle-income group in the United States has been shrinking. At the same time, while the size of the upper-income segment has grown somewhat, the lower-income group has grown more than any other segment. Since the late 1980s and the second edition of this book, the U.S. economy has become somewhat more competitive in the world market—but at the expense of average- to lower-income American workers. “Lean production,” cost cutting, and ever lower wages and benefits paid by American corporations have kept the trend toward ever greater inequality alive for the 1990s. Workers in other countries, as noted in the new Chapter 15 on social stratification in Germany, are now worried that they may suffer the same fate as American workers as their own corporate elites attempt to keep up with cost-cutting American corporations.

The level of income inequality in the United States is only one of the significant changes in the nature of social stratification in the 1990s. As was noted in the first and second editions of this book, my primary task has been to provide an up-to-date, comprehensive examination of social stratification in human societies. And again, more comparative material has been added in this third edition to expand our knowledge of changes in social stratification that have occurred in this country as well as around the world in the 1990s.

Let me again note the most significant changes in this third edition. First, Chapter 1 has been shortened by moving material on types of stratification systems to the beginning discussion of the history of social stratification in Chapter 3. New material has been included at the end of Chapter 1, however, to stress from the beginning the impact of the changing U.S. position in the world system on social stratification. As before,

there has been extensive updating of the data on inequality throughout the book. Much of this has been done in Chapter 2, "Dimensions of Inequality in the United States," which has been extensively rewritten. There has been some revision of the theory chapters, but the main change has been the addition of some material from the old Chapter 6, which has been eliminated.

The chapters from Part III on the various classes in the United States, and especially the chapter on poverty, have been updated to include new research on these subjects and the many changes of the 1990s. The greatest changes to Part III, however, have been the already-mentioned deletion of the old Chapter 6 (with some of its information now distributed throughout several other chapters), and the addition of Chapter 10. Much of the information on gender, race, and ethnic inequalities existed in the second edition but was scattered throughout several chapters. This material has now been concentrated in Chapter 10 along with extensive new information.

Part IV, "The Processes of Social Stratification," groups the previous chapters on social mobility and status attainment and the legitimation of social stratification into a logical set. Both chapters have been updated, though it must be noted that the new research accumulated on these subjects is less significant than that presented in the previous edition.

More than anywhere else, extensive changes have been made to Part V, "Social Stratification Beyond the United States." The old Chapter 15 on world stratification has been moved to the beginning of this section. What is now Chapter 13 also has been extensively revised to reflect the new realities for the modern world system with the fall of communism, the breakup of the old Soviet Union, the rapid economic development in many East and Southeast Asian countries, as well as continuing changes in the United States' and other nations' placement in this world system.

There have been two other major changes in Part V: In the second edition I noted that revision of the chapter on social stratification in the Soviet Union was a difficult task because changes were occurring so rapidly in that country. That chapter began with the statement, "What is set down on paper in early 1990 may be old history before the end of the year, or even the month." At the time I did not realize how dramatically correct that statement would turn out to be. Facing such a task, I decided to drop the chapter on the Soviet Union/Russia completely. But I have replaced it with a new chapter which I have since come to believe is even more important. While teaching and conducting research in Germany during the early 1990s, I came to realize that some aspects of social stratification in Germany are very different from those of the United States and other capitalist nations; and that people in the United States have very little understanding of this situation. Thus, I gathered much new material on social stratification in Germany for this new Chapter 15, and for further contrast placed it directly after the chapter on Japan.

I have significantly revised Chapter 14, "Social Stratification in Japan," adding considerable new material about Japanese elites. In the process of writing a recent book with John McKinstry on elites in Japan (*Who Rules Japan?: The Inner-Circles of Economic and Political Power*), which includes extensive data found only in Japanese publications, I discovered that Japanese elites are more powerful and more extensively interlocked than previously recognized. Japanese elites, in fact, seem to fit the description

provided by C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* more than anywhere else. Much of this new information and its significance for Japan and the rest of the world has been added to what is now Chapter 14.

Finally, I have included study aids suggested by reviewers throughout this third edition. The most significant include new chapter summaries at the end of each chapter and a glossary at the end of the book.

Before concluding this preface, I should note that from the first edition, the basic orientation of this book has followed 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 is 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 means that the system of stratification has been somewhat successful in managing such conflict (at least for a time). As I complete the final work on this edition, I am again in Southeast Asia, conducting research and observing the extremes of inequality in developing countries that are experiencing rapid change. In contrast to 20 or 30 years ago in this region, there is less overt conflict over the unequal distribution of valued goods and services. But as elsewhere, this certainly does not mean that there is no conflict behind the distribution of wealth and poverty in these countries. It means that the question of who gets what, and why, has been somehow tamed for the present. How this can be done in countries with such extensive poverty is one of the most interesting and important subjects in the study of social stratification.

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Let me first acknowledge my debt to the many social scientists whose works are discussed and cited in the pages of this book. Without their knowledge and hard work a book such as this would be impossible. Also, as every writer comes to recognize, there are those in one's more immediate social environment who deserve appreciation. I would like to thank my colleagues at California Polytechnic State University for providing a pleasant location for work and study. My wife and daughters have been very understanding during the many months of work devoted to this book. Again, I am dedicating the book to them.

Several social scientists have provided comments and suggestions which have improved this third edition. I would like to thank Elke Wittenhagen at Duisburg University for providing useful comments on several chapters, and helping me obtain much of the new material on social stratification in Germany. Professors Hermann Strasser and Gerhard Bosch, also at Duisburg University, as well as Dieter Urban now at the University of Stuttgart, provided advice and material on Germany. Professor Robert Slagter at Birmingham Southern University provided important information on class and politics, as well as general encouragement while revising much of this book. Professor Volker Bornschier, through organizing special lectures on "Who Rules Japan?" at the University of Zurich, and providing some of his research material on the modern world sys-

tem, has been especially helpful with revisions of those two chapters. Professor David Grusky provided useful comments and new material on the subject of social mobility and along with Professor Szonja Szelenyi, helped me obtain much of the new Japanese material from the Hoover Institute Library at Stanford University. Mr. Frank Gibney, Professor James Lincoln at Berkeley, Professor Chikako Usui at the University of Missouri in St. Louis, Professor Jeffery Broadbent at the University of Minnesota, and Professors Kiyoshi Morioka and Keiko Nakao at Tokyo Metropolitan University, along with John McKinstry my co-author on "Who Rules Japan?: The Inner Circle of Economic and Political Power," all contributed important comments for revision of the Japan chapter. Professor Leonard Broom assisted me by sending some key information on the German upper class from his research with Professor William Shay. Finally, while conducting research and writing in Thailand, Professors Uthai Dulyakasem, Nikom Tangkapipop, Pornlerd Uampuang, and Kanit Kheovichal at Silpakorn University have helped me in many ways, from providing information used in this book, to securing the basic necessities for working and writing far from home.

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*Harold R. Kerbo*

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**PART ONE**

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**INTRODUCTION**

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