# SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN AMERICA

A Critical Analysis of Theory & Research

LEONARD BEEGHLEY

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# SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN AMERICA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEORY & RESEARCH

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# PREFACE

The concept of social stratification implies, first, that unequally ranked strata or classes exist and, second, that these rankings are relatively stable over time. Thus, stratification can be defined as persisting patterns of inequality. This book is an analysis of social stratification in American society.

The social units making up any stratified society can be individuals, kinship groups (in the United States these are generally nuclear families), and large aggregates formed by some classificatory criteria. All societies have a fairly systematic way of ranking individuals and aggregates, although the basis for ranking varies greatly. Two common criteria are people's positions, such as their occupations, and the valued resources they possess, such as power, wealth, or prestige. Sometimes rankings are complicated by the possession of inherited characteristics, such as race or sex. Generally, people's positions and the valued resources they possess are correlated with one another.

Because patterns of inequality characterize all societies, stratification can be viewed as a fundamental social process. Partly because of its intrinsic importance as a social process and partly because inequality is in some ways more easily measured than other phenomena sociologists are interested in, stratification is a flourishing subfield in sociology. The journals are filled with research reports, and publishers are constantly presenting new monographs on

some aspect of the topic. This book is an attempt at summarizing our knowledge about social stratification in the United States. I have tried to explicate clearly and concisely both the theoretical and the empirical literature, although unfortunately, at least for the advancement of science, the two remain rather separate entities. I have also tried to evaluate the theories and empirical findings in a relatively straightforward and nonpolemical manner.

The book is organized around three basic questions. First, what have social theorists said about the nature of social stratification? Chapters 1 through 5 are an analysis of the most important theories of social stratification as embodied in the work of six persons: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, Ralf Dahrendorf, and Gerhard Lenski. Rather than focusing on the history of ideas (which is done too often), I have taken these men seriously as social theorists. Toward that end, each person's work is explicated in a fairly detailed manner and then criticized. Hopefully, the criticisms are not *ad hominen* in nature. The emphasis in these chapters is on problems of theory and theory construction in sociology. In chapter 6, I try to show how each theorist has contributed to our knowledge of stratification processes and present a heuristic model for the study of persisting patterns of inequality. This model provides the organizing rubric for the remainder of the book.

The second question is, how unequal is American society? Chapters 7 through 13 deal with this topic. Chapter 7 explicates and criticizes the literature on three interrelated topics: occupational prestige, class identification, and status inconsistency. These topics juxtapose the subjective and objective aspects of stratification in America. Chapters 8 through 11 portray the social characteristics of the poor, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, and the rich in a relatively detailed yet straightforward manner. In these chapters some of the more significant biases inherent in the empirical literature are exposed. Like many people, sociologists are often guilty of letting their political biases affect their selection of topics and interpretation of data. Chapters 12 and 13 ascertain the degree of inequality in the United States in terms of caste relationships. Here the units of analysis are those large aggregates differentiated by race and sex. These chapters show that, despite a great deal of verbiage about affirmative action, it is still clearly the case that people acquire positions in American society based primarily upon their ascribed characteristics.

The third question is fundamental to any analysis of persistent patterns of inequality: how do people get into and out of positions? Chapter 14 describes the processes of status attainment and mobility in the United States. It will be seen there that people's family background and their level of achievement (especially in school) are decisive in determining occupational success in America.

One final introductory comment is necessary. No book on social stratification can avoid taking political stands. Many of the topics dealt with here—for example, poverty, racial inequality, and sexual inequality—would be considered "social problems" in other contexts, and there are inevitably political implications involved in the way data on these issues are interpreted. It is better for an author to make his or her political biases explicit so that readers can more easily see the difference between sociological and political judgments. Thus, it will be apparent that a somewhat old-fashioned liberalism pervades the empirical portions of this book. That is, it seems to me that American society would be better off if it were characterized by somewhat more equality than is generally true today.

Equality can have at least two different referents: equality of opportunity or equality of results. With a sort of knee-jerk reaction, most Americans say they believe in equality of opportunity. After that, it is every man for himself. (And that phrase, with its male orientation, immediately suggests at least one aggregate that is not granted equal opportunity.) By equal opportunity, most people mean that everyone ought to have a similar chance to succeed. Yet equal opportunity is not possible because, over the long run, those individuals who do succeed will try (often successfully) to protect their hard-won benefits and pass them on to their children. Thus, inequality of opportunity is inevitable. In practice, the only way to ensure some degree of equality of opportunity is to also ensure that some degree of equality of results exists.

Like most authors, I have had a great deal of help. Mary Anna Hovey and Jonathan H. Turner each read the entire manuscript. In addition to making many important (and sometimes face-saving) suggestions, they also helped me to write clearly. Several other people also read and commented upon various chapters, among them Wilber Bock, Nicole Cauvin, Henri Cauvin, Judy Corder-Bolz, Benjamin Gorman, Joan Huber, Gerald R. Leslie, Angela O'Rand, Ellen Van Velsor, and Joseph Vandiver. Even though I did not heed all their suggestions, I am most grateful. For two summers, Ron Ferrall graciously provided office space and secretarial help at the State University of New York, Albany.

A final note: many authors acknowledge the indirect contributions made by their spouses and children, and I must do the same, for my wife and daughter have been supportive throughout. At the same time, however, they have often impeded completion of this project. Their hindrance has made me more contented.

Gainesville, Florida L. B.

# CONTENTS

# 1
# KARL MARX. INEQUALITY, CLASS, AND CONFLICT

Karl Marx was both a revolutionary and a social scientist. His goal was to provide a theoretical justification for revolutionary conflict. As a result he authored a political creed as well as a theoretical analysis of society. While Marx's writings span several academic disciplines, this chapter is an attempt at suggesting his contributions to the study of social stratification. Toward that objective, the following issues are dealt with: (1) the relation between revolution and theory in Marx's work; (2) the assumptions underlying his theory; (3) his method for studying social inequality; (4) his model of the process of stratification; (5) his theory of stratification; and, finally, (6) some brief critical comments.

## REVOLUTION AND THEORY IN MARX'S WORK

Marx was a revolutionary who engaged in a life-long struggle to overthrow capitalism. He was a participant, organizer, and often a leader of radical groups during the nineteenth century (see Fernbach, 1974a; 1974b; 1974c; Berlin, 1963). Much of Marx's written work is explicitly revolutionary in intent, and the remainder is designed to be the scientific underpinning for such political activity. As a literary genre, revolutionary writings are nearly always polemical and argumentative, since they are designed to provoke action. Such works also tend to deal with historically unique events in a jargon-laden manner (Friedland, 1973). These traits make understanding

difficult for modern readers, who are often unfamiliar with the historical situation in which revolutionaries worked.

Marx saw the great inequality that existed in early industrial societies. He saw that the masses of people lived in great misery, and he wished to stimulate people's attempts to reorganize their social arrangements so that the needs of all could be met. In this regard, no better example of revolutionary literature exists than the *Communist Manifesto.* Like all such literature, the *Manifesto* is a call to arms. In this case, it is an appeal to the proletariat of nineteenth-century Europe to usher in a new society. As Isiah Berlin (1963:164) has observed, no other political movement has produced a document of such power and eloquence.

*It is a document of prodigious dramatic force; in form it is an edifice of bold and arresting historical generalizations, mounting to a denunciation of the existing order in the name of the avenging forces of the future, much of it written in prose which has the lyrical quality of a great revolutionary hymn whose effect, powerful even now, was probably greater at the time.*

Berlin (1963:159–79) continues by noting that the *Manifesto* helped to spark the revolution of 1848 in Europe.[1] It is as a revolutionary pamphlet that the *Manifesto* is most often remembered, especially in the popular mind.

However, the *Manifesto* is also a theoretical document of great importance. Unfortunately, the theory of class and class conflict which it contains has often been too dogmatically interpreted, even by sympathetic commentators (for instance, Dahrendorf, 1959). The problem is that Marx's more strictly theoretical analysis must be extrapolated from a highly polemical context (see Marx, 1974a; 1974b; 1974c). For example, among his most famous statements in the *Manifesto* are "the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle" and "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."[2] These two arguments are much more complex than they first appear, for Marx knew well that no society actually divides into only two classes.[3] The *Manifesto* contains two sorts of theoretical contributions. First, it is an example of Marx's use of a model of the stratification process (as in the two statements quoted above). Second, it contains a theory of class formation that is still useful today. The remaining sections of this chapter are an explication of these two points.

## ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING MARX'S SOCIAL THEORY

The assumptions upon which Marx based his theory of social inequality in particular and his analysis of society in general are straightforward. They are conclusions extracted from his study of

history.[4] The first conclusion is that social theory must be empirically based and grounded in "the existence of living human individuals." Thus, all social analysis should begin by examining actual people in the real world who face the practical problem of surviving. Marx's second conclusion is that, unlike other animals, only people manipulate and alter their environment. "They begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization." In so doing, he said, people are "conscious"; that is, they are self-reflective and rational. This last point has important implications, for individuals who can reflect on themselves and their situation are capable of assessing their positions in society and acting in terms of their own interests. Marx argues that one effect of such abilities has been the growth and maintenance of inequality throughout history.

Having arrived at these conclusions, Marx then realized that the major task in any actual analysis is to discover how people have organized themselves throughout history, both socially and in relation to their physical environment. The empirical basis of such organization lies in three social facts that are common to all societies.[5] Marx clearly states that he is not referring to successive historical stages of development. Rather, he argues that all these facts "have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and they still assert themselves in history today."

The first social fact common to all societies is that people must produce sustenance from their physical environment in order to live and thereby "make history." As Marx observes, human "life involves before anything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other [material] things." All he is suggesting here is that the satisfaction of such basic physical needs as food, clothing, and shelter must occur or no society can survive and hence no history can exist. Need satisfaction is only possible through production, that is, interaction with the environment in some socially organized manner. By focusing on the production of material goods, Marx makes work the center of human life, since people cannot survive without it. At the same time, by focusing on work, he also reflects general tendencies in Western thought—including beliefs in the efficacy of social action, in people's ability to master both nature and society, and (most fundamentally) in progress (see Diggins, 1972; Nisbet, 1969).

The second social fact underlying Marx's analysis of stratification processes is that people are always creating new needs. The reason is that production or work always involves the use of tools or instruments of various sorts, which are constantly being improved upon so as to provide a better material life (food, clothing, shelter, and so on). Thus, production and consumption structure each other in a cumulative fashion, and as one set of needs is satisfied, new

ones appear.[6] Because people constantly acquire new instruments, these new needs are also satisfied. This process continues in a generally escalating fashion, and people are able to satisfy not only their purely biological needs, but also their socially created ones. As Dupre (1966:148) has pointed out, Marx argues that it is in the production of "luxury" that people become human, which is to say civilized. "Because there is no limit to the needs he can create, or to the means of satisfying them, man continually transcends himself." Production thus serves a dual purpose: (1) to satisfy physical needs and (2) to express people's humanity—in Marx's terms, their "species being." Marx (1964:113) argues that other animals produce only to satisfy an "immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom." He amplifies this point in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1964:113).

> *Indeed, labor,* life-activity, productive life *itself, appears in the first place merely as a* means *of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a* means to life.

Throughout history, people have been producing material goods, satisfying their physical needs, and creating new socially defined needs. Thus, what people produce and the way they produce (that is, how the work process is organized) is an indicator of their historically developed human characteristics. An important implication is that human nature is not something eternally fixed but varies with the social environment.

The two social forces noted above—the necessity to produce and the creation of needs—are both structured by a third, which cannot be separated from the others: people form groups and propagate the species. The generation of tools and their use in production involves at least some cooperation among people. "By social," Marx says, "we understand the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end." When people organize and cooperate together in groups, they also tend to propagate. As a result of the combination of all three facts, human population can expand. The proliferation of people is both stimulus for and a result of the concomitant creation of new needs, new instruments, and the latter's application in the productive process. This process occurs within groups where people cooperate with one another and propagate. The modes of cooperation are simple at first, as befitting the available instruments. They only become more complex with the passage of time. Humans cooperate first within the

family and then, later, outside of it. Marx suggests that "the family which to begin with is the only social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new needs, a subordinate one."

As should be clear, Marx's analysis of these three social facts is explicitly circular and historical. Like all his essential ideas, each implies all the others, and when taken together they also imply additional phenomena of importance.[7] Humans are inherently social animals (Marx, 1970b:189) who live and make history in terms of the social structure into which they are born. This is why it is important to emphasize that social theory must be empirically based and to remember that only human beings produce their sustenance by manipulating and altering their environment.

Today these seem like simple and not very controversial ideas. But during the nineteenth century they were quite radical, for Marx was writing in opposition to the then dominant philosophic discourse and at a time before the legitimacy of social scientific research had been established. At that time, the task of systematically studying the real world was precisely what many philosophers were avoiding, especially those whom Marx called the German Ideologists.[8] He saw that in their purely philosophic writings "struggles" occurred, "revolutions" were launched, and "victories" won, but only in terms of abstract ideas. Marx believed that the German Ideologists dealt only "with the shadows of reality," for they did not inquire "into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, [or] the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings." For this reason, Marx argued that much nineteenth-century philosophic debate was empty and meaningless. It had no basis in the real world where people were living quite miserably.

Marx asserted that when the practical problems of living people who organize, cooperate, produce, and try to survive are made the cornerstone of analysis, then "philosophy as an independent branch of activity loses its medium of existence" and science begins. This position constitutes a fundamental epistemological break with much previous philosophy (especially German philosophy), for Marx in effect "stood Hegel on his head" by giving philosophy an empirical basis.

Basing philosophy on the activities of living individuals does more than make it relevant by converting it into a social science. Marx saw problems of social life in very practical terms. Philosophic discourse that proceeded without reference to living and dying people served to justify and maintain the status quo by failing to identify the actual social conditions and needs of the masses. Contrary to much popular belief, Marx knew that ideas do have an impact on the world, since it is in ideological terms that people become conscious of their positions and their interests. In any society, those persons who originate and distribute the predominant ideas (in this case,

philosophers) tend to do so in terms of their own interests. According to Marx, this is why German "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world differently, [when] the point is to change it." By basing science in the real world, Marx had the theoretical and, by extension, the political tools to do just that.

## MARX'S METHOD FOR STUDYING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Like the theoretical assumptions underlying his work, Marx's method for studying social inequality is also straightforward. It is clearly stated in his most important methodological text, the "Introduction" to the *Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1970b:188–217). The method consists of a series of four steps. First, one always begins analysis of the social by examining the concrete existence of people in the real world. As he notes, "the subject, society, [is] the precondition of comprehension."[9] Second, the observer constructs an abstract model comprised of those social facts that (1) are intrinsic to the study of inequality and (2) seem to appear in all societies.

The third step in Marx's method is to systematically compare the abstract model with the real world. The purpose of this step is very clear. He observes that while "the most modern period and the most ancient period will have [certain] categories in common, it is precisely their divergence from these general and common features which constitutes their development." Again, Marx is most interested in events in the real world—the empirical "divergence" from an abstract model. This is why Marx studied history. Such analyses provided data from which to make abstract generalizations, as well as the means for evaluating a society at a particular stage of development. As Engels observed, "our conception [that is, theory] of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the manner of the Hegelian. All history must be studied afresh."[10]

The final step in Marx's analysis is to evaluate a society at its particular stage in history. This task is vital because social relationships are a product of specific historical conditions, and the models used to elucidate them "are nothing but abstract conceptions which do not define any of the actual historical stages of production."

The theoretical strategy outlined here can be summarized as follows. Marx constructs an abstract logical model based upon events in the real world and then uses it as the baseline from which to compare the intricate relationships that have developed in that world. As such, this strategy is nothing more than the venerable ideal-type method. It is commonly thought that ideal types as a mode of theory construction originated with the German sociologist Max Weber (see Chapter 2). However, as Lopreato and Alston (1970) point out, it has a long history in all the sciences. But Marx adds a unique wrinkle, which is seen in his last step. He not only attempts

to compare his model with the real world, but also tries to assess the "historical stages of production" displayed by each society and projects their development into the future. Marx believed he had discovered the laws of historical development and that, at some point, all societies pass through certain developmental stages. He tried to suggest that general direction of history by asserting "the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future" (Marx, 1967:8–9).

## MARX'S MODEL OF THE STRATIFICATION PROCESS

The theoretical focus of Marx's study of systems of inequality is the concept of class. His model of stratification is designed both to expose the empirical existence of classes and lead to a theory of their formation and consequences. His point is to show that the existence of inequality implies both class formation and revolutionary class conflict. This section is divided into three parts. (1) Marx uses the concept of class in such a cavalier way that much misunderstanding has resulted. Thus, a brief note on some of the problems connected with his use of class is a necessary introduction to his model of the stratification process. That model has two elements, which make up the second and third parts of this section. (2) The model identifies the key variables in the study of class. (3) It forms the basis for Marx's dialectical interpretation of the stages of human history in terms of classes.

### The Problem of Class[11]

The problem with Marx's use of class is simply that he uses the term promiscuously. As Ollman (1968) suggests, Marx identifies varying numbers of classes as existing in the same society, at the same time, often in the same text. He also changes the operational criteria that are used to define classes and, again, often in the same text. For example, in *Capital,* Marx says there are only two great classes—the capitalists (also called the bourgeoisie) and proletarians. This usage conforms to the division suggested in the *Manifesto.* However, in *Capital,* Marx also refers to the existence of three great classes—capitalists, proletarians, and landowners. Furthermore, in the same text he refers to the peasants as a class, to the existence of "ideological classes," and to a specific occupation (bankers) as a class. His other writings are also dotted with inconsistent usage. After dividing society into two parts in the *Manifesto,* Marx then refers to the "lower middle class" and also describes the lowest layer of society as the *lumpenproletariat*—the "dangerous class."

Marx obviously uses the concept "class" very loosely. At least three general tendencies can be identified in his work.

First, often Marx simply wishes to label a group, faction, or layer in society that is of particular interest. For example, in the *Class*

*Struggles in France,* he uses the terms "ruling class" and "ruling faction" interchangeably (Ollman, 1968). When using class as a labeling device, Marx is mainly interested in analyzing people's positions, their relations to others, and to the whole society.

Second, sometimes Marx tries to sketch the actual relations among the various strata. The complexity of such analyses is only suggested in the *Manifesto*:

*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 these classes, again, subordinate gradations.*

Thus, when doing actual historical analyses, Marx said, the real relations among specific classes had to be taken into account. As Engels (1959:400) noted, "when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error was permissible."

Marx's third way of using class is more abstract in that he tried to extrapolate beyond the welter of specific relations and get at those which were most important. He often used either the tripartite division or the dichotomic division in this fashion. These two types are not necessarily inconsistent if it is remembered that Marx recognized old ways of life, such as that of the landed aristocracy, often maintained themselves even within the context of new modes of production. As Ossowsky (1963:83) concludes, "the dichotomic scheme is intended to characterize capitalist society with regard to its dominant and peculiar form of relations of production, while the multidivisional scheme reflects the actual social structure."

**Key Variables in the Study of Class**

Crucial to Marx's methodology is constructing a model of the process of stratification by abstracting out those social facts that are common to all societies. He begins with the three variables identified above. (1) In all societies, conscious and rational people produce their basic sustenance in order to survive. (2) Historically, they increase productivity levels in order to satisfy increasing needs. (3) The population increases and modes of cooperation change (generally in the direction of increasing complexity). These three variables constantly interact with one another over time, and together they imply a division of labor. While the division of labor remains a mushy concept even today (see Gibbs and Poston, 1975), it basically refers to the fact that in a society various people perform different but interdependent tasks. For example, Marx notes the importance of economic factors, since people must produce in order to survive. In all societies, some persons must gather resources from the envi-