Second Edition

INEQUALITY AND STRATIFICATION

Class, Color, and Gender

Robert A. Rothman

Inequality and Stratification: Class, Color, and Gender

Second Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

The study of social class has been a central theme in sociology since its origins in the nineteenth century. Much has changed since the first edition of this book was written in the mid-1970s, but no development has been more salient than recognition that considerations of color and gender are central to a full appreciation of the composition and dynamics of class systems. Although this perspective was addressed in the first edition, the recent outpouring of fresh conceptualizations and new research has resulted in a significant reorganization and reorientation of the whole volume in an attempt to include a systematic consideration of the interaction among class, color, and gender.

Consequently, the preparation of this version demanded broader change and revitalization than is usually required for the preparation of a second edition. The book has been retitled to reflect the new emphasis. In fact, it can more actually be described as a new book rather than a revision. Although the American experience remains as the central emphasis, the scope has been broadened to elaborate other historical and contemporary forms of social stratification.

One thing that has not changed is the central pedagogical thrust. This edition, like the original, is intended to provide the fundamentals of social stratification for undergraduates in a concise and readable format. Consequently, it may be used in two ways, either as a basic text for courses in stratification or as one component of courses such as introduction to sociology, social problems, race and minorities, or gender studies.

Any book that attempts to lay out the fundamentals of an area as complex and broad as stratification cannot elaborate all the areas of debate and controversy. Therefore, more advanced students are directed to the material contained in the Bibliography and Additional Readings sections for the resources needed to explore these issues in more depth and detail.

This book has benefited from the ideas and comments of countless friends and colleagues, and from the supportive advice of the following, who served as reviewers for the publisher: Norval D. Glenn, University of Texas, Austin and George F. Stine, Millersville University, Pennsylvania.

Robert A. Rothman

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Part One

The Nature of Inequality and Stratification

Structural inequalities based on position in the economic system (class) and ascribed statuses (color and gender) shape the rewards and opportunities of all members of industrial societies. The effects are most pronounced in the distribution of economic rewards, social judgments and evaluations, and access to political power but extend to most facets of modern life. Chapter 1 develops concepts and perspectives basic to an understanding of sociological perspectives on inequality and stratification. Chapter 2 reviews three major theoretical conceptualizations and interpretations of the origins of class systems that inform current theory and research. Chapter 3 develops models of four recurring forms of stratification—slave, caste, estate, and class— each of which has contemporary relevance, either characterizing a current society or having enduring consequences for understanding stratification in the United States in the 1990s.

Chapter 1

Structural Inequality and Social Stratification

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY: An Introduction and Overview

Differences—sometimes vast differences—in wealth, material possessions, power, prestige, and access to simple creature comforts are readily apparent to anyone in modern industrial societies. Inequalities in the distribution of financial resources are among the most readily evident and easy to document. Some people enjoy immense inherited wealth that allows them to indulge extravagant lifestyles. Wealthy American heiress Doris Duke, for example, feels it necessary to fly her two pet camels with her on her annual trip to her vacation home in Hawaii (Clancy, 1988). Industrial societies also contain millions of people whose daily lives are a struggle against economic hardship. One child in five in America grows up in "poverty." Hundreds of thousands of homeless are compelled to wander the streets and fill the shelters of Los Angles, London, and Moscow. Many others are denied fundamental necessities. It is believed, for example, that each year 250,000 people are turned away from hospitals in the United States because they are too poor to pay (Ansberry, 1988). Between such extremes are smaller gradations of monetary inequality, often measured by the size of homes people live in, the kind of cars people drive, or the quality of the schools their children attend.

Probably the most important contribution that sociology can make to the analysis of social inequality is to emphasize that inequality is patterned rather than random. Many of the most significant rewards, resources, privileges, and opportunities are distributed at least in part on the basis of social position or membership in socially defined categories. This is referred to as *structural inequality*. In industrial societies, social class (position in the economic system, defined by occupation for the vast majority of people), color or minority status (race and ethnicity), and gender are among the three most salient social categories in understanding the distribution of inequality.

CLASS, COLOR, AND GENDER: Basic Concepts

The analysis developed here centers on the concept of social stratification as it has traditionally been used in sociology to denote the division of industrial societies into broad, economically grounded classes. This will entail an examination of the origins and arrangement of classes and the economic, social, and political inequities associated with class position. An integral part of the analysis involves systematically exploring the ways that color and gender modify or amplify the ramifications of class. The implications of color and gender permeate most facets of social life in industrial societies but such a comprehensive undertaking is beyond the scope of this volume. Rather, the more narrowly defined intent is to focus on the convergence of class, color, and gender.

Three specific areas are emphasized. The first deals with the effects of class, color, and gender on attainments and mobility within the class system. This approach builds on the well-documented observation that children of blue-collar parents, members of minority groups, and women are often under represented among the upper middle class and over represented at lower levels of the class system, and proceeds to explore the social and educational arrangements that work to the disadvantage of these groups.

Next are the differences among people at the same level in the class system for there are many situations in which considerations of color or gender apparently overwhelm class considerations. For example, the overall gender gap that separates women's and men's earnings is much greater in some working class occupations than others. In addition, although some African Americans have attained upper middle class status they continue to confront segregation in the housing market and discrimination in the job market.

Third is influence of color and gender on how social class position is perceived and experienced. For example, it appears that there are gender differences in the perceptions of the stratification system as well as variations in the manner in which women and men at different class levels interpret and cope with the demands of dual-career family life.

Therefore, it is evident that a full understanding of the dynamics of inequality requires a consideration of the interaction of class, color, and gender. Each of these three basic concepts requires clarification at the outset.

Social Class

For the purposes of this analysis, *social classes* are defined as those people who occupy a similar location in the economic system (i.e., the social

organization of production and distribution) in industrial societies.[1] Position in the economic system includes two major considerations, the type of work people do and the ownership and control of resources. For most people, except for those at the higher and lower levels of the stratification system, occupation is the most convenient single measure of social class. The lines separating classes are, admittedly, not always clearly demarcated, and the position of some occupations is more complex than others. For example, the position of agricultural workers, the self-employed, and small to medium-size business owners is less consistent than most.

Social class position defined by occupation is a factor in understanding inequality because people's work sets effective limits on financial rewards and social prestige, influences the stability of employment and the chances for advancement, locates people in systems of workplace authority and power that has consequences that extend beyond the workplace, defines some features of social relations on and off the job, contributes to the way people think about themselves and others, and has enduring implications for their children.

American society, as well as other industrial democracies, can be divided into five broad social classes. A small proportion of the population forms an *elite class*, wielding unusual economic, political, and social power. The elite class is actually composed of two analytically separate groups—an *economic elite*, made up of individuals and families whose power derives from ownership of major economic resources in the form of property and stocks and bonds, and an *institutional elite*, whose power resides in the structural positions they occupy: top leadership in business, the media, government, and other dominant organizations and institutions. Specific individuals may simultaneously be members of both groups, and the extent of this overlap is the subject of much controversy.

The next level, the *upper middle class*, combines occupations based on expert knowledge (professional people such as physicians and scientific personnel) and includes organizational managers who are below the executive level but still exercise a significant level of power. The *lower middle class* includes technicians, lower level administrators, clerical personnel, and most sales workers. In the United States *working class* implies manual work, also called blue-collar work, and describes those who do largely physical labor in the factories and mills. Some are engaged in highly skilled work (auto mechanics), and others do more routine work (on assembly lines). Such skill differentials are an important consideration in understanding how manual workers perceive themselves.

[1] The term social class is widely used, but it has many different meanings. It is one of those concepts that sociologists have been unable to specify to the complete satisfaction of one another, in part because definitions vary with ideology and methodology. Consequently, any conceptualization encounters both critics and supporters. There is no recourse except to note that social class is herein defined in a manner that is not necessarily the same encountered in the work of other sociologists.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are *the poor* [2] those who live on the very margins of the productive system. Numbered in this class are both the *working poor*, who fill the least skilled and most unstable jobs, and those who are unemployed, underemployed, or discouraged because they believe they cannot find work.

Developing an accurate picture of the class structure of American society is a complex task, but the basic outlines are as suggested by Exhibit 1.1.[3] There is a small elite, making up no more than 1 or 2 percent of the population. About one quarter of society can be defined as upper middle class on the basis of administrative, managerial, and professional occupations. Approximately one third of the population holds lower-middle-class jobs in clerical, sales, and administrative support positions. One quarter fills the manual occupations of the working class. Perhaps one in four Americans may be counted among the poor, holding marginal jobs or facing unemployment.

Countless significant rewards are associated with class position, not the least of which is financial. Most economic rewards for the majority of people flow directly from their occupation, with approximately 80 percent of the money people earn coming from their work (Ryscavage, 1986).

Color: Race and Ethnicity

People of color are, to quote a widely used phrase, groups of people who, "because of physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from

[2]This group was typically called *lower class* in earlier sociological analysis, but that term has been abandoned because it carries pejorative connotations. More recently, it has become commonplace to use "the poor" to identify those occupying the lowest levels of the stratification system, and that convention is employed here.

However, the use of the term the poor is not without problems. One is that it tends to concentrate attention on monetary consequences rather than structural position. It must be emphasized that there are other noneconomic consequences of occupying the lowest levels of the system. A related issue is that it can lead to confusion with official poverty levels. "Poverty" is a measure of economic resources developed by the government in the 1960s and, although a useful tool, is not based on structural position.

[3]There are several unresolved technical and conceptual issues in the definition of classes. One methodological problem is that the most comprehensive and up-to-date national occupational data are collected by government agencies, but the data are not organized and reported in a manner consistent with the class analysis used here. A related difficulty is that not all people are part of the paid work force, requiring an estimation of their class position.

There is also the conceptual problem of defining the unit of class analysis—individuals or family units. Although there is a tendency to dichotomize the issue, both perspectives have merit. It is evident that families are the locus of residence, socialization, lifestyle, and consumption patterns, and that household units frequently include partners at the same class level. However, class differences within families are also common and relevant to the way people experience their position in the stratification system. In addition, increased marital instability and the increase in the number of unmarried adults points up the necessity of focusing on the individual.

Exhibit 1.1
A Model of Social Class in the United States

Social Class	Percentage of the Population	Number Employed (ooos)
Elite	1-2	
Upper middle class	20-25	
Professionals		10,900
Middle managers		7,500
Sales, except retail		7,800
Lower middle class	30-35	
White collar		6,700
Technicians		3,600
Sales, retail		2,600
Administrative support		18,400
Working class	25-30	
Precision production		13,800
Machine operators and fabricators		8,200
Transportation workers		4,800
Protective services		1,900
The poor	15-20	
Private household workers		320
Service workers		6,500
Handlers, cleaners, helpers, laborers		4,800
Unemployed		6,500

Note: Class designations are based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational categories reorganized as follows. Middle managers: executive, administrative, and managerial minus management-related occupations; professional: professional specialty minus teachers, counselors, social workers, recreation workers, and health assessment occupations; white collar: teachers, counselors, social workers, recreation workers, and health assessment occupations.

Source: "Employed Civilians by Detailed Occupation," *Employment and Earnings*, 55 (January, 1991), Table 22.

others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment" (Wirth, 1945: 347). The term people of color currently coexists with the term minority group and encompasses two traditional sociological concepts—race and ethnicity. Race is a social definition of a social category of people, typically based on visible physical characteristics, such as skin color, stature, and facial features. Ethnic groups are identified by cultural

(or national) origins, which may be manifest in language, religion, customs, and practices.

Patterns of Intergroup Relations

Societies of any size and complexity typically include subgroups based on race or ethnicity, and the United States is no exception. The bringing together of peoples from diverse cultural and racial origins does not necessarily produce social, economic, or political subordination. A case in point are the Cossacks and Tungas of Manchuria, who coexisted for centuries within a context of political independence and mutual respect (Lindgren, 1938). Unfortunately, though, some form of economic or social subordination is the all-too-common outcome.

Minority groups become members of a society by different paths and this has important implications for subsequent intergroup relations. *Immigration* is the flow of peoples in search of jobs or political freedom, beginning in the United States on a large scale in the 1840s and continuing today as waves of newcomers pour into America. Immigration tends to be voluntary, but there are also several forms of involuntary contact. Groups are sometimes incorporated into a society as the result of *territorial expansion.* A more powerful group, prompted by military, economic, or political goals, encroaches on previously independent populations, as was the experience with Europeans encountering native Americans or Mexicans in the Southwest. Other groups become members of the society through a process of *importation*, typically to provide a work force, as was the case in nineteenth-century Hawaii where Chinese laborers were brought in to harvest sugarcane. Finally, there is *involuntary servitude*, the enslavement of groups for the purpose of providing labor, as in the case of African slaves, or some other purpose for the dominant members of society.

During the 1980s more than 5 million immigrants entered the United States (with the largest numbers originating in Korea, China, Vietnam, and Mexico), joining the literally hundreds of diverse racial and ethnic groups that coexist in America. Minority status has important implications for location in the class system and, in turn, inequalities in wealth, prestige, power, and life chances. Recent decades have witnessed breakthroughs by individuals, but progress has frequently been slow and halting for groups that lag behind in many areas. As shown in Exhibit 1.2, African Americans and Hispanics—the only two groups for which there are reliable data—are underrepresented among upper-middle-class occupations and overrepresented in clerical work, among operatives and in service work.

A brief overview of several of the large minority groups is useful, and serves to emphasize the fact that broad statistical groupings often mask marked differences in culture, religion, and language.

Exhibit 1.2
Class Distribution of Persons of Color in the United States 1990

	All Workers	White	Black	Hispanic
Upper middle class				
Managerial	12.6%	13.3%	7.2%	6.0%
Professional	13.0	13.4	8.7	5.8
Lower middle class				
Technicians	3.2	3.2	2.7	1.9
Sales	11.9	12.4	8.0	8.1
Clerical	15.5	15.4	16.7	13.1
Working class				
Craft	11.6	12.1	8.6	13.2
Operatives	11.1	10.5	16.6	17.8
The poor				
Service	13.3	12.1	23.1	18.9
Laborers	4.2	4.0	6.5	6.7
Nonurban occupations	3.0	3.2	1.9	5.4

Note: Hispanics may be of any race.
Source: "Employed Civilians by Detailed Occupation," *Employment and Earnings* 37 (October, 1990), Tables A-60-61.

MAJOR MINORITY GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES

Blacks, or *African-Americans*, are the largest single minority group in the United States, numbering over 30 million and making up about 12% of the total population.[4] Scholars continue to debate the original social and political status of the first blacks in colonial America during the seventeenth century, for there is evidence that some came as indentured servants to be freed after serving fixed terms, but it is clear that by the end of the century

[4]The shifting language of identification among disadvantaged groups reflects the social and political realities of their histories. Some American slaves apparentlly favored "African" over the more insulting terms used by their owners, at least until white supremacist groups mounted campaigns to deport freed slaves. "Negro" dominated the social discourse until the 1960s when the former racial slur "black" was adopted as a proud statement of group solidarity and identity. Late in the 1980s, some leaders began to champion "African-American" to encourage people to identify themselves by their history and culture rather than skin color. Recent surveys suggest that "black" continues to be favored by a sizable majority of American blacks although "African-American" is favored by the young and better educated (New York Times, 1991).

slavery was a social and legal reality for Africans. Slavery was supported by an ideology of racism that continues to have contemporary ramifications. Although open expressions of racism have declined, white supremacist groups continue to march, campuses across the nation are frequently marred by racial incidents, and thinly disguised expressions of racism infiltrate social and political life.

The erosion of social and legal barriers to voting, housing, jobs, and education combined with changing attitudes have made it possible for black Americans to achieve upper-middle-class status and even occupy positions among the institutional elite. However, the collective economic, educational, and occupational attainments of blacks continue to lag behind those of white Americans and other minority groups. Black children are more likely to die in infancy than white children and are three times more likely to be growing up in poverty or in a single-parent family. Fewer African Americans than whites attend college; those who do graduate earn one third less than whites with the same level of education. And, the net wealth of black households is one tenth that of whites (O'Hare, et al., 1991: 2).

Hispanic is commonly used to describe all persons of Spanish-language origin, although many prefer to identify themselves as "Latinos." Hispanic is a very loose category, encompassing people from quite different national and cultural traditions. There are approximately 20 million Hispanics in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). The largest single subgroup (63 percent) is of Mexican descent and is concentrated in the Southwest. Many Mexican Americans describe themselves as "Chicano." Puerto Ricans (13 percent) have tended to settle in the Northeast, and Cubans (5 percent) in Florida. Most of the rest of the Hispanic population is from Central and South America (11 percent) or trace their origins to Spain or other nations (8 percent).

The Hispanic population in the United States grew by about 30 percent during the 1980s, making it one of America's fastest-growing minority groups and leading to predictions that it will become the largest single minority category by the twenty-first century. Sheer numbers have granted Hispanics a growing voice in political affairs, and they hold over 4,000 elected offices at the local, state, and national levels. However, Hispanic high school dropout rates and unemployment rates are well above national averages, and income stands below that of white Americans.

Another large minority group is *Asian*, including peoples from such disparate cultural and religious traditions as India, the Philippines, Korea, China, and Japan. Asian immigration on a large scale began with the Chinese in the nineteenth century, followed by the Japanese at the turn of the century. An ongoing series of political and economic upheavals beginning in the post–World War II period has more recently caused the influx of significant numbers of Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians.