

GLOBAL STRATIFICATION

SYSTEM OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Social stratification is the division of large numbers of people into layers according to their relative power, property, and prestige. It applies to both nations and to people within a nation, society, or other group. Although they may differ as to which system of social stratification they employ, all societies stratify their members. In addition, gender is a basis for stratifying people in every society of the world. The three major systems of social stratification are slavery, caste and class.

Slavery

Slavery is a form of social stratification in which some people own other people. Initially, slavery was based on debt, punishment for violation of the law, or defeat in battle. Gerda Lerna notes that women were the first people enslaved through warfare. They were valued for sexual purposes, reproduction, and their labor. Slavery could be temporary or permanent and was not necessarily passed on to one's children. Typically, slaves owned no property and had no power; however, this was not universally true.

To meet the growing need for labor, some colonists tried to enslave Native Americans, but this attempt failed miserably. The colonists then turned to Africans, who were being brought to North and South America by the British, Dutch, English, Portuguese, and Spanish. When American slave owners found it was profitable to own slaves for life, they developed beliefs to justify what they wanted and to make slavery inheritable. That is, the slaves' children could be sold, bartered, or traded. The practice of slavery was written into law.

Slavery is still practiced in certain parts of the world today. Although their governments have made slavery illegal, the slave trade has been revived in Sudan and Mauritania. The enslavement of children for work and sex is also a problem in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Caste

Ascribed status is the basis of a caste system. Caste societies try to make certain that boundaries between castes remain firm by practicing endogamy (marriage within their own group) and developing rules about ritual pollution, teaching that contact with inferior castes contaminates the superior caste. Although abolished by the Indian government in 1949, the caste system remains part of everyday life in India, as it has for almost 3,000 years. This system is based on religion and is made up of four main castes which are subdivided into thousands of specialized subcastes or *jati*. The lowest caste, the Dalit, are known as the "untouchables." If higher castes are contaminated by "the untouchables" then an *ablution* (washing rituals) is required, to restore purity.

An American racial caste system developed in the United States when slavery ended. Even in the earlier parts of this century, all whites were considered to have a higher status than all African Americans and separate accommodations were maintained for the races in the South.

Class

A class system is a form of social stratification based primarily on the possession of money or material possessions. Initial social class position is based on that of one's parents (ascribed status). No matter what system a society may use to divide people into different layers, gender is always an essential part of those distinctions within each layer. On the basis of gender, people are sorted into categories and given differential access to rewards. Social distinctions have always favored males. In every society, men's earnings are higher than women's and most of the world's illiterate are women.

The growing interconnectedness among the world's wealthiest people has produced a global superclass, one in which wealth and power are more concentrated than ever before.

WHAT DETERMINES SOCIAL CLASS

According to Karl Marx, social class is determined by one's relationship to the means of production—the tools, factories, land, and investment capital used to produce wealth. The bourgeoisie (capitalists) own the means of production; the proletariat (workers) works for those who own the means of production.

While Marx recognized the existence of other groups—farmers and peasants, a lumpenproletariat (industrial working class), and self-employed professionals—he did not consider these groups social classes because they lacked class consciousness.

As capital becomes more concentrated, the two classes will become increasingly hostile to one another. Class consciousness, or an awareness of a common identity based on position in the means of production, will develop; it is the essential basis of the unity of workers, according to Marx. Marx believed that the workers would revolt against the capitalists, take control of the means of production, and usher in a classless society. However, the workers' unity and revolution are held back by false class consciousness—the mistaken identification of workers with the interests of capitalists. Unlike Marx, Max

Weber did not believe that property was the sole basis of a person's position in the stratification system, but rather that property, prestige, and power determine social class. Property (or wealth) is an essential element; however, powerful people, like managers of corporations, control the means of production, although they do not own them. Power is the ability to control others, even over their objections. Prestige may be derived from ownership of property; however, it also may be based on other factors, such as athletic skills.

COMPARATIVE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Great Britain's class system can be divided into upper, middle, and lower classes. Great Britain's population is about evenly divided between the middle class and the lower (working) class and about one percent of the population makes up the upper class. Language and speech patterns are important class indicators. Education is the primary way the class system is perpetuated from one generation to the next.

Until recently, a simple model was used consisting of the First World (industrialized, capitalistic nations), Second World (communist—or socialist—nations), and Third World (any nations that didn't fit the other categories). A more neutral way of categorizing nations is to use terms related to a nation's level of industrialization: "Most Industrialized," "Industrializing," and "Least Industrialized."

The Most Industrialized Nations (U.S., Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, and other industrialized countries of western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) are capitalistic, although variations exist in economic systems. These nations have only 16 percent of the world's population, but have 31 percent of the world's land. The poor in these nations live better/longer than the average citizens of the Least Industrialized Nations.

The Industrializing Nations include most of the nations of the former Soviet Union and its former satellites in eastern Europe. These nations account for 16 percent of the world's population and 20 percent of the land. The dividing line between these nations and the Most Industrialized Nations is soft; consequently, it is difficult to classify some nations.

In the Least Industrialized Nations of the world, most people live on farms or in villages with low standards of living. These nations account for 49 percent of the earth's land and 68 percent of the world's population. Most people in the Least Industrialized Nations are poor. Most of the world's population growth occurs in these nations.

MAINTAINING GLOBAL STRATIFICATION

Michael Harrington asserts that the Most Industrialized Nations control the Least Industrialized Nations because they control markets, set prices, and so on. The Most Industrialized Nations sell weapons and manufactured goods to the Least Industrialized Nations on credit, turning these countries into eternal debtors. They use resources to pay off the debt, thereby preventing them from developing their own industrial capacity.

Multinational corporations contribute to exploitation of the Least Industrialized Nations. Some exploit the Least Industrialized Nations directly by controlling national and local politics, running them as a fiefdom. The Most Industrialized Nations are primary beneficiaries of profits made in the Least Industrialized Nations. They often work closely with the elite of the Least Industrialized Nations, many times in informal partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

In some situations, multinational corporations may bring prosperity to the Least Industrialized Nations because new factories provide salaries and opportunities that otherwise would not exist for workers in those countries. The new technology favors the Most Industrialized Nations, enabling them to maintain their global domination. The profits of multinational corporations can be invested in developing and acquiring the latest technology, thereby generating even greater profits. Many of the Least Industrialized Nations do not have the resources to invest in new technology, creating an even greater gap between the levels of industrialization globally. Global domination could be on the verge of a major shift from West to East.