

# **Stratification and Inequality**

# Social Stratification

- **Social Stratification** = a social **hierarchy**, or evaluation-ranking-reward system
  - People at the top are considered ***better*** than those at the bottom.
  - The definition of 'better' depends on the criterion of evaluation:  
Braver, Smarter, Stronger, Purer...
  - People are not only *different*, they are seen as superior or inferior.



# Social Stratification

- **Social Stratification =**
  - In nearly all societies, people are evaluated on the basis of some characteristic and placed into higher or lower-ranking groups.
  - Actors are sorted into social positions that carry unequal rewards, obligations, and expectations



# Social Stratification

## 3 characteristics:

1. They persist for a long time
2. They are resistant to change ('conservative')
3. Each is supported by a 'legitimizing rationale' or ideology.

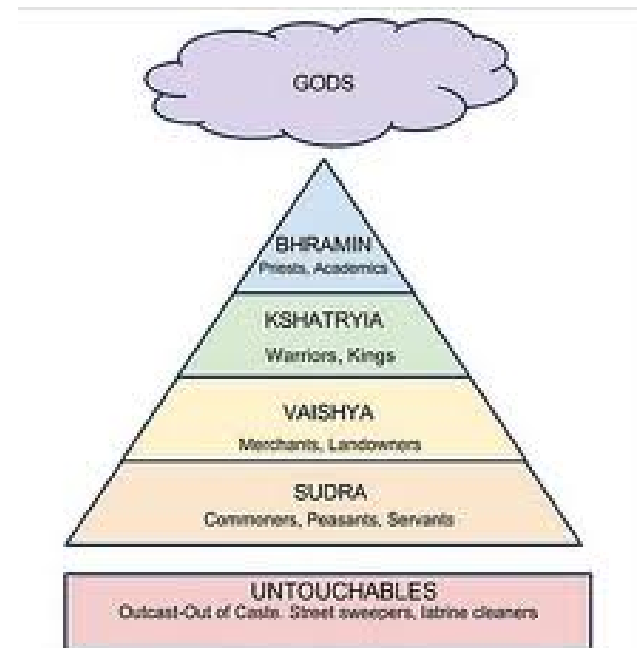


# Caste Systems

- In a ***caste system***, one's rank is determined at birth; based on **ascribed characteristics**.

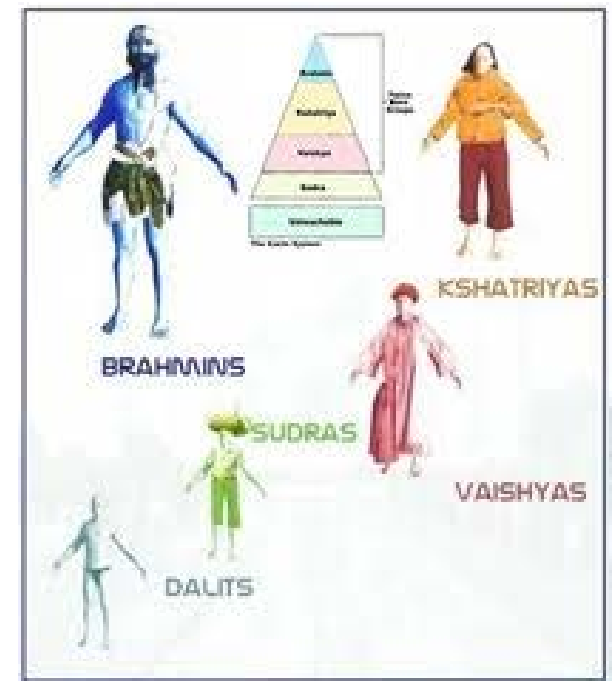
## 3 characteristics:

1. **Separation** in matters of marriage and contact
2. **Division** of labor
3. **Hierarchy** in which one group is regarded as superior to another.

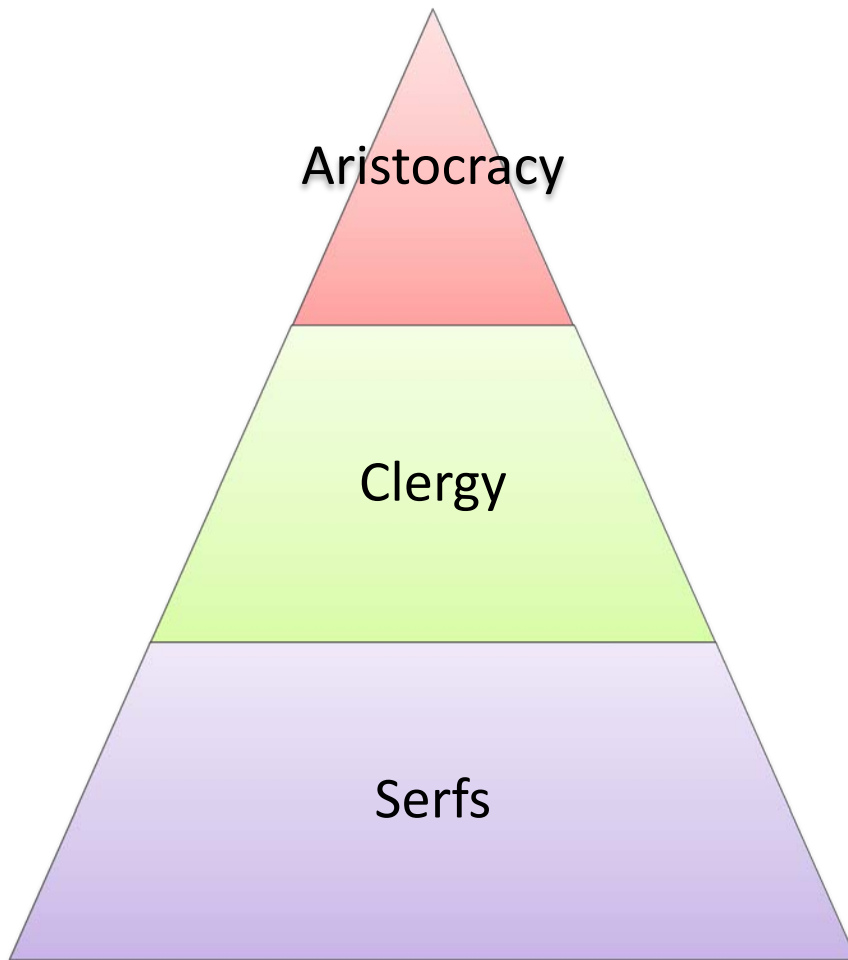


# Caste Systems

- Most famous is that founded in India about 4,000 years ago.
- Portuguese described these groups as 'casta' meaning 'pure'; the groups were like different races
- In India, based on Hindu ideas of **transmigration** (reincarnation) of soul and **karma**: *'inexorable application of the law of cause and effect'*

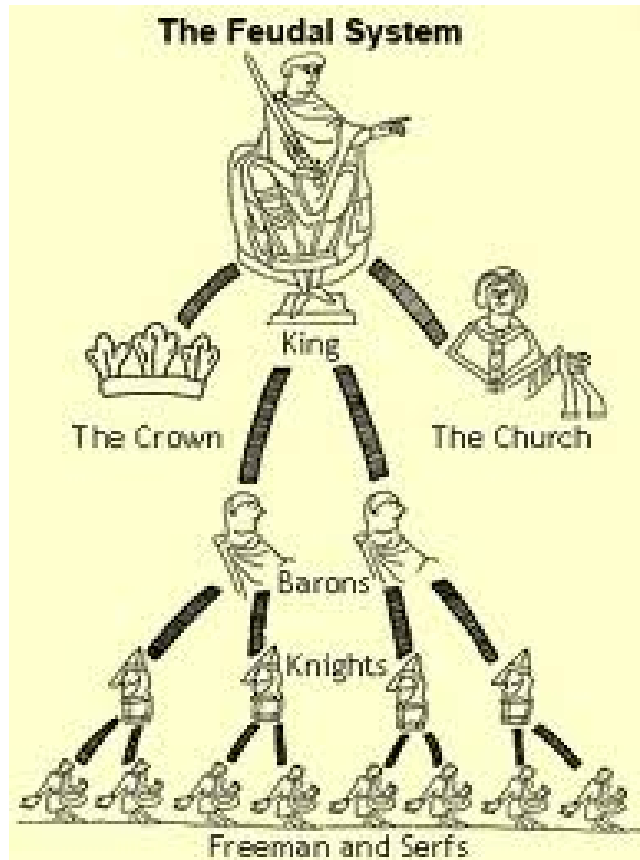


# Estate Systems



- Characterizes the status hierarchies found in Europe prior to capitalism.
- Membership in the Church (clergy) was not based on ascribed characteristics.
- However, highest rankings within clergy come from first estate (aristocracy).
- Like the caste system, position in an estate system is determined at birth. Contact is permitted, but generally impersonal.

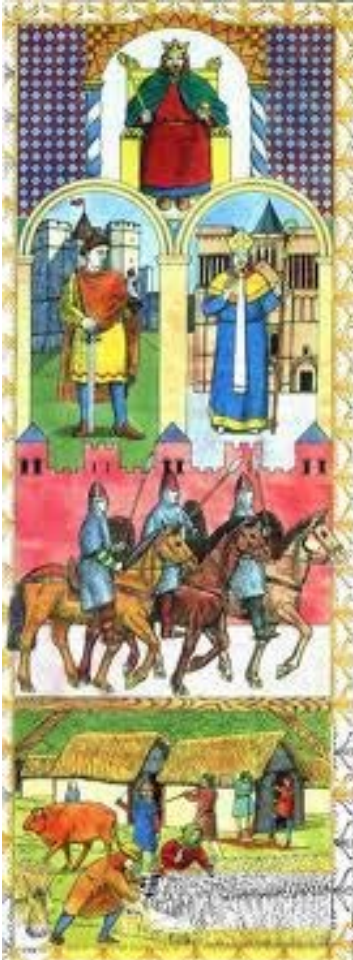
# Estate Systems



- The sovereign (king) would give land grants to his military allies who helped him conquer a region.
- Over time, these land grants were usually given to the heirs of the previous owner, thus becoming hereditary.
- Peasants , or serfs, were people legally tied to specific parcels of land! They in effect belonged to the land-owning aristocrat!



# Estate Systems



- In feudalism, the person above you, to whom you were obligated was called your **lord**, and the people below you were called your **vassals**.
- Unlike a military chain of command, however, in feudalism, *‘the vassal of my vassal is not my vassal’!*
  - The subordinates of the people subordinated to you were not necessarily loyal to you!

# Class Systems

- In theory, a **class system** is a hierarchy based on **achieved characteristics** in a society of **equal opportunity**, i.e. a **meritocracy**.
- Class systems are legitimized by the belief that ***rewards are proportional to effort or talent***, i.e. *people get what they deserve*.



# Theorizing Social Stratification

- Are all social stratification systems based on a single salient characteristic or many? If there are many ways of evaluating people, can we regard one as being the most important in a society?
- Is there only one hierarchy or several overlapping hierarchies? Is social stratification *uni-dimensional* or *multi-dimensional*?

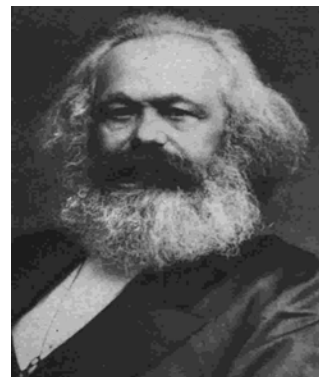


# Theorizing Social Stratification

- **Karl Marx:** argues that one's relationship to the '*means of production*' determines the status hierarchy of a society.
  - In capitalism, this means that the most important force of social change comes from the conflict of interest between owners and workers.
- **Max Weber:** argues that the most important aspect determining one's position in the status hierarchy is not one's relationship to the means of production, but one's *market situation*.

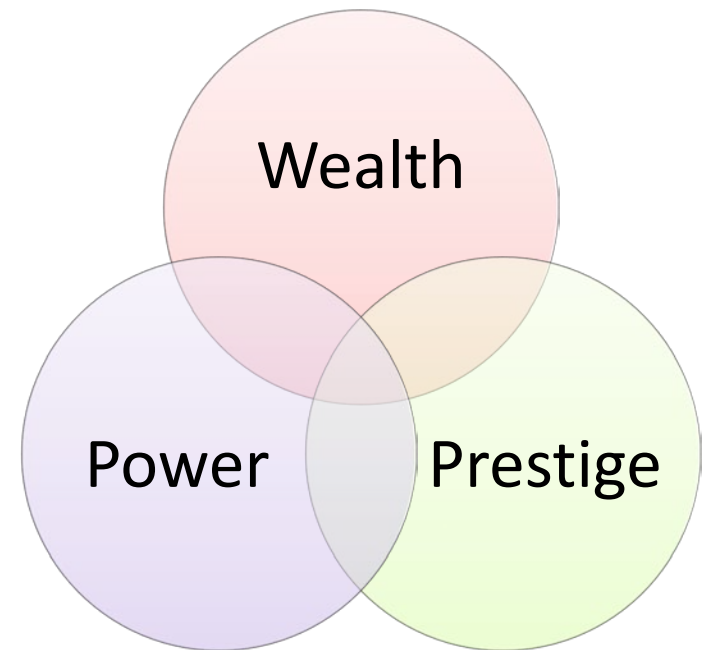


**VS**



# Theorizing Social Stratification

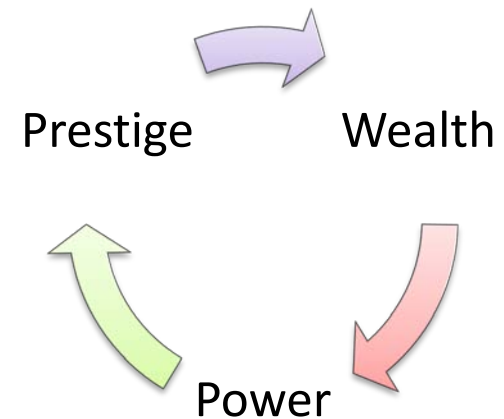
- **Weber defines class as follows:**
  - The term ***class*** refers to any group of people ... [who have the same] typical chance for a supply of goods, external living conditions, and personal life experiences, insofar as this chance is determined by the ... power ... to dispose of goods or skills for the sake of income in a given economic order .... ***Class situation*** in this sense is ultimately ***market situation***.
- **Social stratification is *multi-dimensional***



Different dimensions of status.

# Theorizing Social Stratification

- **SES = socioeconomic standing, or socioeconomic status.**
  - In sociology, we usually acknowledge that one's position in the overall status hierarchy is influenced by a variety of factors.
  - Money and power are related and tend to reinforce one another, but they do not always overlap!
  - A person can be very influential and powerful, but be poor. Someone can be very wealthy but lack prestige, etc.



# Theorizing Social Stratification

- Weber defines **POWER** as **follows:** ‘the **chance** of a man or a number of men to realize their own will even **against the resistance** of others...’
- “**Without exception every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of domination**”
- *Charismatic leaders* use personal authority to generate mass followings that challenge the traditional order.



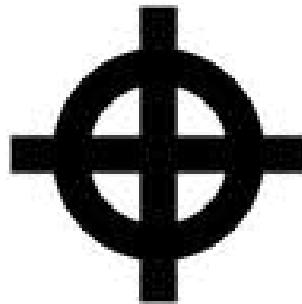
Mussolini and Hitler are  
(negative) examples  
of charismatic leaders

# Levels of Societal Complexity

1. **Theocentrism:** one religious worldview that everyone shares. God is at the top.
2. **Anthropocentrism:** 'Man' is at the center. Other cultures and worldviews are acknowledged, but regarded as inferior.
3. **Polycentricism= “many centers”:** society with many centers, many contexts or situations. **Poly-contextuality = “many contexts”:** no meta-context or super-set of situations embeds all others *from the point of view of all others*.



Theocentrism



Anthropocentrism



Polycentrism



# Slavery

- Slavery has existed within all three types of social stratification systems just mentioned.
- Most extreme form of slavery is called *chattel slavery*.
- Slaves are sometimes prisoners of war or debtors. However, if slavery persists for more than a few generations, it tends to become hereditary.
- Slaves can be *manumitted*, or freed, whereas outcastes cannot lose their status.



# How does inequality arise in class-based societies?

## Three possible explanations:

### 1. Individualist, or Market framework

- Hierarchies are *emergent*.
- Inequality of individuals' effort or talent lead to inequality of status positions (income, power, prestige, etc.)
- Higher 'rewards' for some individuals are both i) *compensation* for their effort, and ii) *incentives* to elicit that effort

### 2. 'Structural' framework

- Hierarchies are *enacted (i.e. imposed)*
- Differences in outcomes (status) *not* due to intrinsic individual attributes, but to the social positions they occupy.

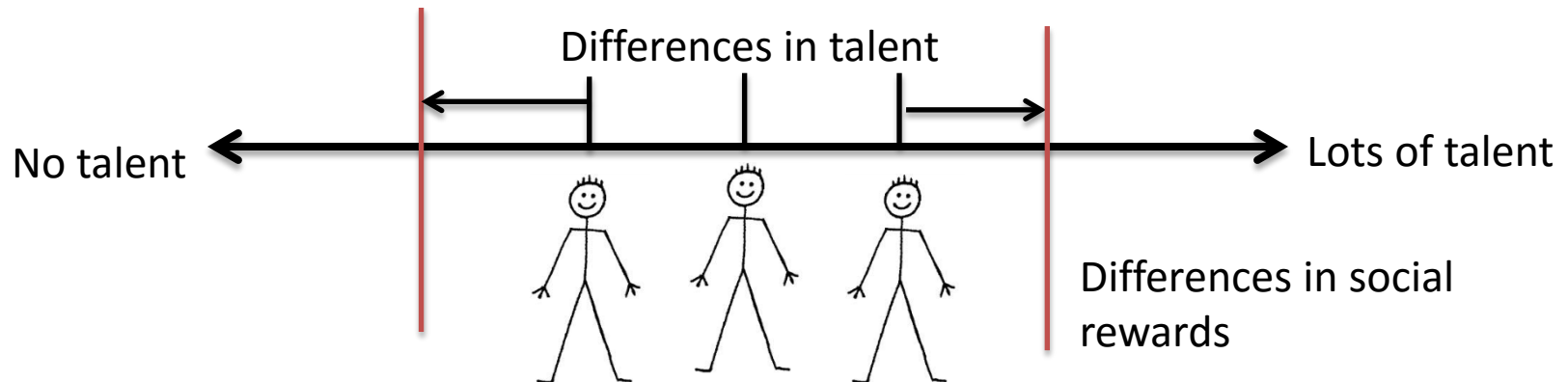
# How does inequality arise in class-based societies?

## 3. 'Rich get richer' framework:

- hierarchies are *emergent*, (*i.e.* unintended, spontaneous) but resulting inequalities don't reflect the efforts or talents of the individuals.
- People in higher-ranking groups receive *disproportionally more rewards*, and those in lower-ranking groups *disproportionally fewer rewards*,
- **In other words, differences in social rewards are far greater than the differences in 'talent' upon which these rewards are ostensibly based.**

# 'Rich get richer' framework

- Even assuming perfect equality of opportunity, and assuming everyone desires to live in a society where social rewards are based on one's talents and/or hard work, we *should not expect that the differences in the social rewards received will be proportional to the differences in the talents/efforts of the individuals!*
- ***Those with a little more 'talent' get disproportionately more rewards, far more than they deserve, even assuming perfect equality of opportunity!***



# **‘Rich get richer’ framework**

- **Do these people have talent?  
(acting skill, charisma, beauty,  
etc.)**
- **If so, is the above-average  
wealth and fame they receive  
proportional to their above-  
average talents?**
- **Why are these people wealthy  
and famous and not you!?**



# 'Rich get richer' framework

## How it works:

- **Our evaluations of others are *socially influenced*:** People pay attention to how everyone else is being evaluated by everyone else.
  - This *amplifies* underlying differences between individuals and makes the rewards allotted to them disproportional to their talents and/or efforts.
  - **Examples:**
    - i. People who are popular tend to attract more attention than non-popular people. Why? Because they are already popular!
    - ii. Children with a reputation for being 'bad' are more likely to get in trouble compared to a 'good' kid, for doing the same things.
    - iii. Some journal articles get cited way more than others, simply because they are more frequently cited.



# **‘Rich get richer’ framework**

- The ‘rich get richer’ effect is also known as: winner-take-all effects, cascade effects, popularity tournaments, the Matthew effect, and preferential attachment.
- These are all examples of positive (reinforcing) feedback.
- **Conclusion: even if there was total equality of opportunity, *and* everyone had identical talents, you would still expect to see hierarchies in class-based societies!**

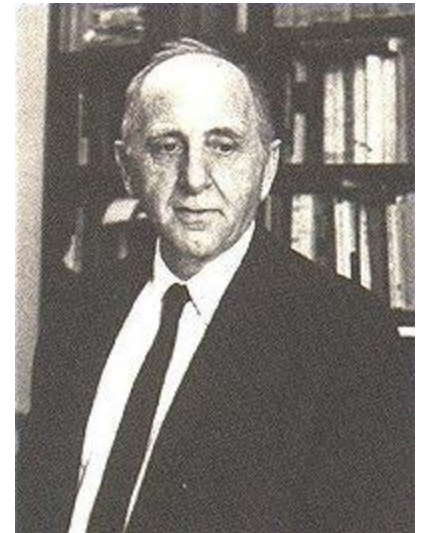
# How much inequality is acceptable?

- Even if rewards *were* proportional to talents, this would not be *sufficient to justify an unequal society*.
- Why reward those with more innate ability?
- How much inequality one tolerates is really a normative or moral question.
  - For example: we could assert that there ought not be any particular relationship between what one can accomplish and what social and psychic rewards are given.
  - “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”- Marx.



# Kuznets Curve

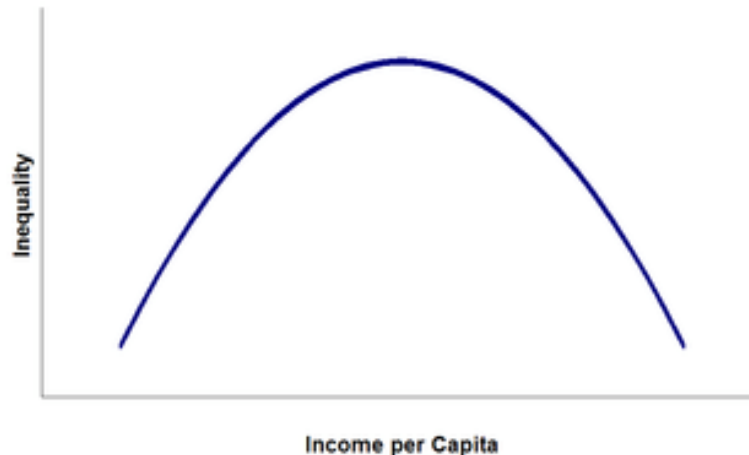
- The Kuznets Curve plots the relationship between Economic Growth and Inequality *within* countries
- In the 1950s the economist Simon Kuznets hypothesized that as countries developed (industrialized), inequality would rise initially, but after a certain threshold of development had been reached, income inequality would eventually decline.



(1901 – 1985)

# Kuznets Curve

- Plotted on a graph, the relationship looks like this:



- This hypothesis was generally discredited. **There is not a single relationship between economic growth and inequality describing all countries and time periods.**