

# Stratification and Inequality

L16





- The fate of the Titanic dramatically illustrates the consequences of social inequality for the ways people live – and sometimes whether they live at all. 🔊

# Social Divisions

- Social Diversity or Difference is a key feature of social world.
- When these differences start becoming socially significant – sociology begins to focus on **social divisions**
- Most societies have some or the other form of social divisions – the term used to refer to these is **‘Social Stratification’**
- Through social stratification entire categories of people are elevated above others, providing one segment of the population with a disproportionate amount of money, power and prestige.



# Social Stratification



- **Social stratification** refers to a system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy.
- It is vertical division of society, not horizontal
- Horizontal division are like differences but no social gradation
- In vertical division of different categories of individuals are ranked in relation to each other
- Social stratification can happen in two ways:
  - through being born in a specific category (ascribed status) - gender, age, family name, caste, or skin color, over which they have no control
  - People's positions in the social hierarchy can be based to some degree on their (achieved statuses), gained through their individual, direct efforts.
- Think for a moment as to why gender and age are being put as stratification and not differences?



# Key Defining Features of Social Stratification

1. Social stratification is a characteristic of society, **not simply a reflection of individual differences**  
– It is a system which confers unequal access to resources.
2. Social stratification **persists over generations**  
Some amount of social mobility (change in one's position in a social hierarchy) does happen but for most people, however, social standing remains much the same over a lifetime  
(Distinction between **closed** and **open** systems of stratification)
3. Social stratification is **universal but variable**.
4. Social stratification **involves not just inequality but beliefs**  
Persistence of **ideology**- cultural beliefs that serve to legitimate key interests and hence justify social stratification systems  
Everywhere, people with the greatest social privileges express the strongest support for their society's system of social stratification, while those with fewer social resources are more likely to seek change.

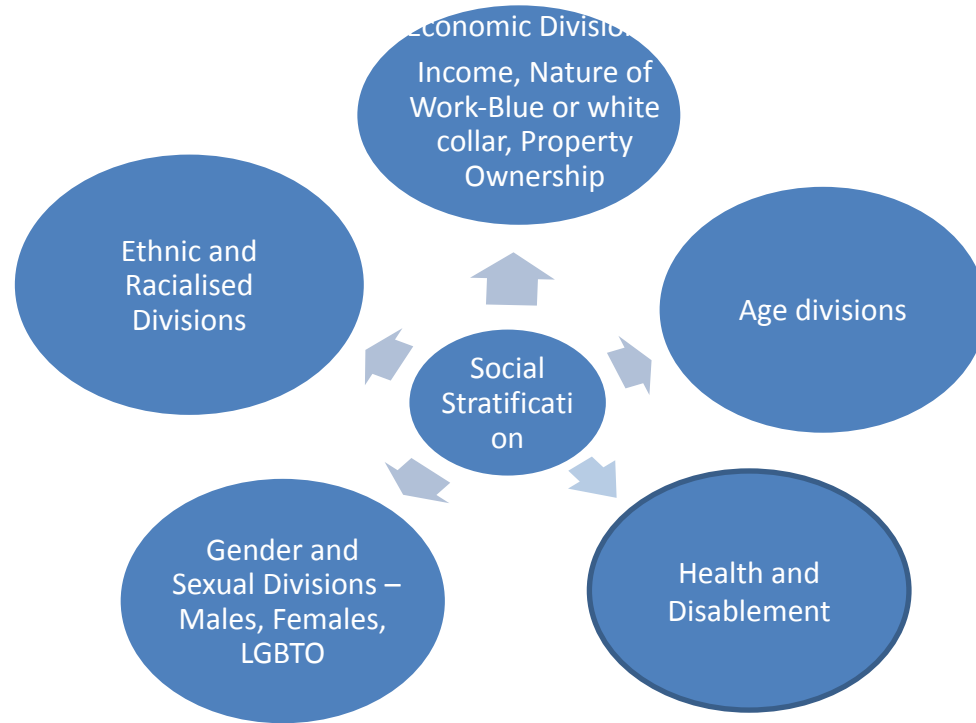
5. Social stratification engenders shared identities as belonging to a particular social category different from others

Consciousness about identities – working class, labourers, elites, upper class, Brahmins, Dalits, Whites, Blacks – know they belong to a category very different from other categories

In all systems of social division, people have a sense of their location – and may accept, negotiate or even resist it



# Forms of Social Stratification



## Some Consequences of Social Stratification

- Within such stratified systems, Iris Marion Young (1990) identified a number of key processes at work. These include:
- **Social exclusion and marginalization:** A process by which 'a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life. (Think of how disabled people can't access most parts of buildings or think about Dalit's access to Temples/Educational Institutions or women access to Sabrimala temple)
- **Exploitation:** A process by which there is 'the transfer of the results of the labour of one social group to benefit another'.
- **Powerlessness:** A process by which people come to lack the authority, status and sense of self that many professionals tend to have.
- **Cultural imperialism:** Which is 'the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm' (Think of how culture changes and westernized when British were in India)
- **Violence:** Which is directed at members of a group simply because they belong to that group (violence against women and the homophobia against gays, discrimination against SC, untouchables, Blacks)



## **Explaining Social Stratification- Theoretical Approaches**

- Why are societies stratified after all?
- 3 major theories of social stratification-
  - Functionalist Theory
  - Marxist theory / Conflict Theory
  - Weberian theory

# Functionalist Theory of Stratification

- Based on Functionalism as a school of thought
  - Organismic Analogy; All social institutions (parts) in a social system exist to **function** to maintain the society (whole)
- Proposed by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore
- In this view social stratification exists because it fulfills a function for maintenance of society.
- They argued that social stratification has beneficial consequences for the operation of a society.
- This is because in a society there will be a multiplicity of roles and positions, some more complex over others (Think of the nature of work of a car tyre changer or MCD cleaner and that of a heart surgeon/ Professor/Banker ....)
- These different positions will make different levels of contribution for well-being of a society.



- High complexity important positions will demand scarce talent of people who will have to be significantly educated and trained (think of amount of study and investment made in becoming a surgeon/ Professor/ Banker...)
- Functionally complex positions will have more rewards attached to it (Surgeon/Professor/banker.... will be better paid, have higher living status, more respect in comparison to a mechanic/ Sweeper....)
- This strategy pays off, since rewarding important work with income, prestige, power and leisure encourages people to do these things.
- In effect, by distributing resources unequally, a society motivates each person to aspire to the most significant work possible, and to work better, harder and longer.
- The overall effect of a social system of unequal rewards – which is what social stratification amounts to – is a more productive society.
- The Davis–Moore thesis implies that a productive society is a **meritocracy** (a system of social stratification based on personal merit)

# Criticisms of Functionalist theory

- The Davis–Moore thesis is a conservative one
  - It argues that some form of stratification exists everywhere but couldn't why these systems can be so very different – from harsh/rigid ones to more flexible, open and closed?
- It can't specify what reward should be attached to any occupational position?
  - How do we define/measure which position is more important?
  - Surgeons may perform a valuable service in saving lives, but a related profession ,nursing, is vastly less well paid. Also think of lowest end of staff offering door to door immunization?



Rachel Clarke   
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So society's \*real\* key workers have just been revealed.

Not the bankers. Not the traders. Not the elite hedge fund managers.

It's the nurses. The doctors. The delivery drivers. The carers. The porters. The teachers. The shelf stackers. The check out staff.

#COVID19

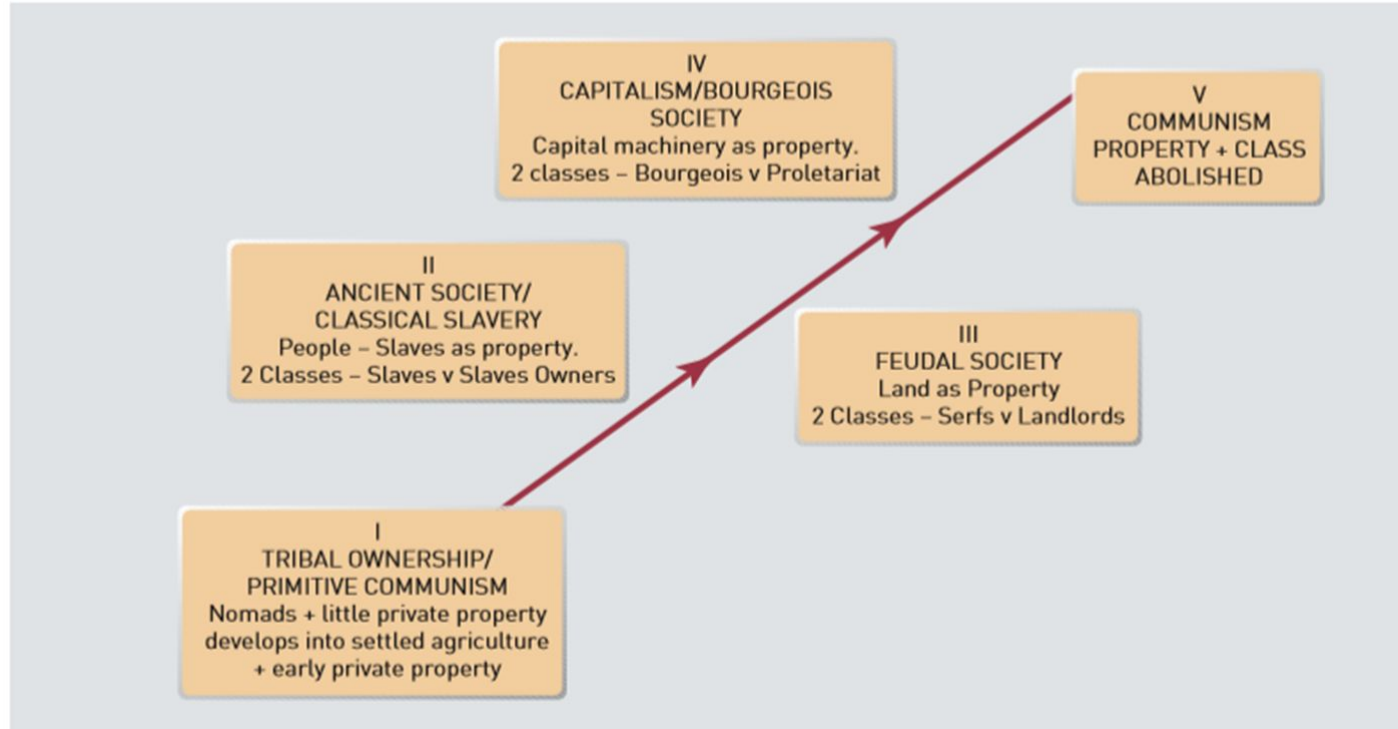
- This theory also exaggerates social stratification's role in developing individual talent
  - Our society does reward individual achievement, but we also allow families to transfer wealth and power from generation to generation.
  - Additionally, for disadvantaged groups - women, ethnic groups, the disabled, stratification still raises barriers to personal accomplishment. It functions to develop some people's abilities while barring others from ever reaching their potential.
- Finally, by contending that social stratification benefits all of society, the Davis–Moore thesis ignores how social inequality promotes conflict and also leaves no space to see if it can be changed through revolution or collective bargaining.

# Marxist/ Conflict Theory of Stratification

- This perspective draws heavily on the ideas of Karl Marx
- Main argument: Rather than benefit society as a whole, social stratification provides major advantages to some people at the expense of others.
- Marx's theory **focused solely on Economic Stratification**
- Marx identified **two major social classes** corresponding to the two basic relationships to the means of production.
- He argued that individuals either
  - (1) own productive property (Owners)
  - (2) labour for others (Workers)
  -
- These two classes and conflict between them existed in all historical epochs



Marx's Conflict Theory showed that Class Polarization existed at all times in History



- In each stage in history, the interests of the two classes will be different and conflicting.
- In earlier societies like feudal, agrarian nobles and serfs were still bound together by long standing traditions and a host of mutual obligations.
- What distinguishes the **conflict** in capitalist society, is how it has **come out into the open**.
- Industrial capitalism dissolved those ties so that pride and honour were replaced by '**naked self-interest**' and the '**pursuit of profit in a blatant exercise of oppression**'.
- Marx believed that the proletariat, with no personal ties to the oppressors, had little reason to stand for its subjugation



- Marx noted great differences in wealth and power arising from the industrial–capitalist productive system, which, he contended, made **class conflict** (antagonism between entire classes over the distribution of wealth and power) in society inevitable.

- A process would take place in which the poorer classes would become more pauperised, polarised and aware of their class position. This would lead to a **class consciousness** (Class-in-itself will change to **class-for-itself**) of their true economic exploitation.

- Alienation** will also lead to development of class-consciousness.



- In time, he believed, oppression and misery would drive the working majority to organise and, ultimately, to overthrow capitalism to establish Socialism

- Marxist theory of stratification envisaged socialism as a more humane and egalitarian productive system that would create a classless society.
- Marxist theory was revolutionary and generated many controversies.
- But the revolutionary developments Marx considered inevitable have failed to materialise.
- Despite Marx's prediction, **capitalism is still thriving- Why have workers in the UK and other industrial societies not overthrown capitalism?**

## Reasons why capitalism is still thriving

- **The fragmentation of the capitalist class** - In Europe 120 years since Marx's death but also in other countries.
  - Rather than single families owning large companies, today, numerous stockholders fill that position.
  - Emergence of Managerial Class
- **White-collar work and a rising standard of living.**
  - 'white-collar revolution' has transformed Marx's industrial proletariat instead of earlier blue collar manual labour
  - Sales, Management jobs – holders perceive themselves higher than manual labourers

- **More extensive worker organization** – Lacked earlier.

- Workers have won the right to organise into trades unions

- Today negotiations between labour and management are typically institutionalised and peaceful in Europe, a picture quite different from the often-violent confrontations common before the mid-twentieth century.

- **More extensive legal protections available to workers now in Europe**

- the government has extended laws to protect workers' rights and has given workers greater access to the courts for redressing grievances.

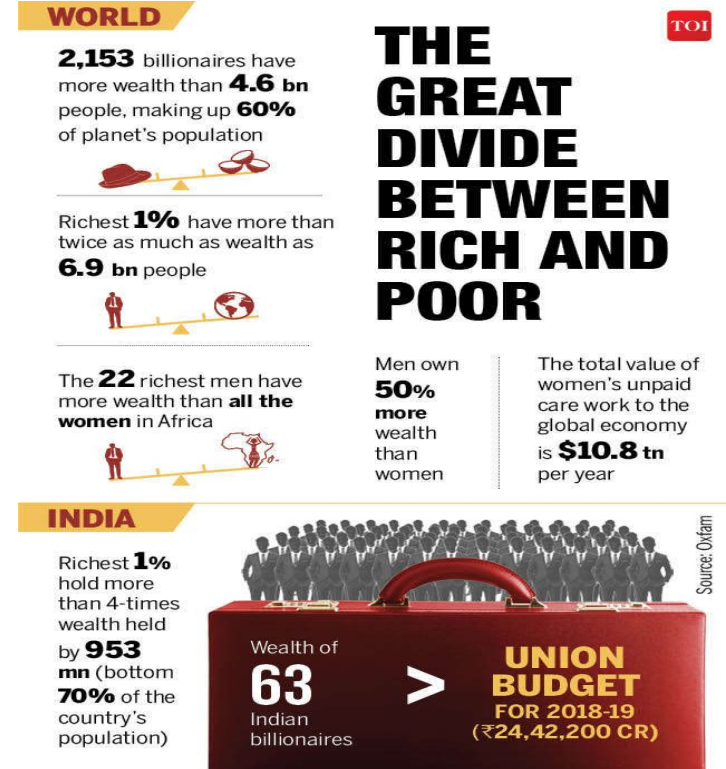
- Government programmes National Insurance, health and safety, disability protection and social security also provide workers more than the capitalists of the nineteenth century were willing to grant them.

# Why Marxian Theory Continues to be Relevant

- 1) **Wealth remains highly concentrated and inequalities have increased in most countries.**
  - Oxfam, 2020 report : In India, richest 1 per cent of the population hold 42.5 per cent of national wealth; Bottom 50 per cent owns a mere 2.8 per cent.
  - Rich getting richer, Not just in India but also across many parts of the world
  - Poverty and large income disparity can threaten social order and cause conflict.

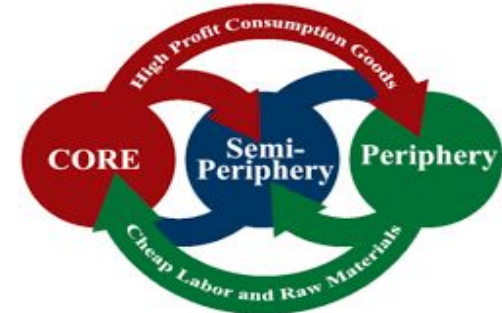
Check out the link:

<https://affairscloud.com/oxfam-report-indias-richest-1-peoples-wealth-is-4-times-of-70-of-population/>



## 2) The global system of capitalism – capitalist operating at the level of the world, not just countries or specific economies.

- Much of production of goods in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has shifted from the high-income countries to low income countries.
- Very low wages paid in low-income countries for labour.
- Poorer countries becoming 'the sweatshops of the world'.
- Marx's model may still hold for societies once the global dimension is taken into consideration.



Wallerstein's World System Theory Model

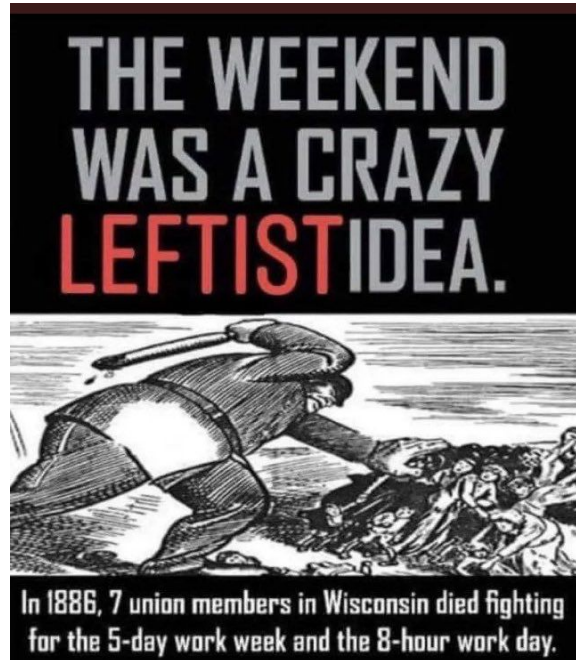
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/apr/28/sweatshops-supplying-high-street-brands>

- 3) Work remains degrading and dehumanising.
  - White-collar revolution delivered little in the way of higher income
  - Much white collar work remains monotonous and routine, especially the low-level clerical jobs commonly
  - **Adhocism/Part-time /Contractual jobs are on the rise and such workers may not be having any form of social protection**
  
- 4) The law still favours the rich.
  - Some Workers have gained some legal protections over the course of the twentieth century

A large majority of workers in most South Asian and some south-east Asian countries are unregistered –  
So no legal protection.

Ways in which law functions, ‘average’ people cannot use the legal system to the same advantage as the rich do.

How our everyday worlds are deeply shaped by the collective action of social movements from below, in ways that make those worlds better and more livable.





# Weberian Theory of Stratification



- Weber considered Marx's model of two social classes too simple.
- Weber proposed a multidimensional theory of stratification-interplay of three distinct dimensions.
  - First is Economic inequality – which Weber termed **class position**. Class as a continuum on which anyone can be ranked from high to low.
  - Second is **Status**-measures social prestige.
  - Third is **Power**
- Marx believed that social prestige and power derived from economic position (remember economic base-structure and rest is superstructure); Weber pointed out that an individual might have high standing on one dimension of inequality but a lower position on another.

- Ex: A government official, for example, may have the power to administer a multimillion-rupees budget, yet earn only a modest personal income.
- Religious heads and priests typically enjoy ample prestige but only moderate power and low pay.
- Those elaborating on Weber's theory of stratification often examine socio-economic status (SES) as a composite measure of social position.
- This can involve class, status and power, embracing work, wealth and income, status dimensions (lifestyle), consciousness and identity as well as where a person stands politically.
- Standing in society and social hierarchy is an outcome of all these factors and they will cumulatively impact an individual's life chances.

# Class Inequality under the shadow of COVID-19 (India focussed)

- <https://science.thewire.in/health/coronavirus-covid-19-hand-sanitiser-washing-social-distancing-food-subsidies-wages/>
- <https://www.todayonline.com/world/new-covid-19-crisis-domestic-abuse-rises-worldwide>
- 



# Inequalities are shaped by Intersectionality

- Intersectionality: Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to describe **how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories.**
- Based on the idea that we have multiple identities that intersect to shape who we are  
**Interaction of diverse identities can produce novel and distinct experiences of inequality for people.**
- **Combinations of identities** - race, gender, ethnicity, class, caste, disability can shape people’s experiences along **differences of privilege and disprivilege.**

“  
IF YOU SEE INEQUALITY AS  
A “THEM” PROBLEM OR  
“UNFORTUNATE OTHER”  
PROBLEM, THAT IS A PROBLEM.

Kimberlé Crenshaw,  
lawyer, civil rights advocate and intersectional feminist



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o>

How many of you have heard the often dreaded 'F' word?

## FEMINISM

BLACK FEMINISM

DALIT FEMINISM

*Why did we need the latter two? Didn't the first one account for all women?*

Can you think about contemporary examples from India or around the world as to how these forms of identities may operate intersectionality?

Gender and Caste?

Caste and Class?

Disability and Gender?

Class and Disability?

Caste and Class?

—----- (This is not an exhaustive list)

Age and Gender?

<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/feminisation-ageing-when-ageing-womens-issue>

Gender and Class

<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/familiar-places-and-people-gender-class-and-womens>