CHAPTER 8

Social Class: The Structure of Inequality

The photographs on the next page show average families from six different countries—the United States, Kuwait, Mali, Bhutan, Argentina, and Albania. They are each pictured outside the family home, with all their worldly goods displayed around them. These pictures, from Peter Menzel's book *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, clearly illustrate some of the inequalities of wealth and power between societies worldwide.

Compare, for example, the U.S. and Albanian families, the Skeens and the Cakonis. What are the differences between these families as evidenced in their possessions? The two Skeen children have their own bedrooms; the four Cakoni kids sleep together on a couch in the kitchen. The Cakonis own a number of working animals: a donkey for transportation and goats, cows, and chickens to provide milk, meat, and eggs. In contrast, the Skeens have a pet dog and several stuffed deer heads hanging on the wall, trophies of Mr. Skeen's favorite pastime, hunting. Every two weeks, the Cakonis hike seven miles to the nearest town to shop for groceries; Mrs. Skeen drives her minivan to a suburban supermarket to stock up whenever she wants. The Skeens have three radios, three stereos, five telephones, two televisions, a VCR, a computer, and three different vehicles; the Cakonis own one radio and one television, which the family considers its most valued possession.

Similar comparisons may be made between the Natoma family in Mali, the Namgay family in Bhutan, the Carballo family in Argentina, and the Abdulla family in Kuwait. The younger Mrs. Natoma carries water from the village well in a bucket balanced on her head; the Abdullas have a private indoor swimming pool. The Carballos have been robbed several times, and Mr. Carballo loads his gun every night at dusk to protect his family; the Namgays own little and live near a Buddhist monastery where monks chant daily for peace. These photographs reveal stark contrasts between the world's wealthiest citizens in places like the United States and Kuwait and its poorest people in countries like Albania and Bhutan. What are the real meanings of terms like *rich* and *poor*, and how do sociologists define them?

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Then and Now

1912: When the *Titanic* sinks, 60% of the first-class passengers survive, 40% of the second-class, and 25% of the third-class

2006: Low-income Americans who live in wealthy neighborhoods suffer mortality rates that are almost three times higher than their rich neighbors

Here and There

United States: Rank of affluence among world nations in 2007: 15; average per capita income: $46,040

Ethiopia: Rank of affluence among world nations in 2007: 196; average per capita income in U.S. dollars: $780

This and That

The top 10% of the world's population earn more than 50% of the world's total income, or about $25,400 annually per person

The bottom 10% of the world's population earn less than 1% of the world's total income, or about $400 annually per person

Family Portraits From the top left: the Skeens (Pearland, Texas), the Cakonis (Bei Burrel, Albania), the Natomas (Kouakourou, Mali), the Namgays (Shingkhey, Bhutan), the Carballos (Salta, Argentina), and the Abdullas (Kuwait City, Kuwait).

HOW TO READ THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter, we will examine, from a sociological perspective, the stratification that occurs in all human societies. Despite rhetorical claims about equality of opportunity for all, America is a profoundly hierarchical society, with the benefits and opportunities of living here unequally distributed among its citizens. A sociological perspective on stratification will increase your understanding in several important ways. First, it will help you to see inequities in places you may have overlooked, such as your own town, neighborhood, and school. Second, it will help you consider how positions in social hierarchies tend to shape the lives of individuals: access to health care, the justice system, employment, and housing are all governed by structures of inequality. Third, it should enable you to identify your own place in these social arrangements and to see how some of your own life chances have been shaped by your position (or your family's position) in certain hierarchies. Finally, a knowledge of stratification may help you play a role in changing systems of inequality. Look for ways that you can alleviate some of the problems that social inequality causes—if you can have an impact, even a small one, then this chapter will not have been in vain!

Social Stratification and Social Inequality

Social stratification in one form or another is present in all societies. This means that members of a given society are categorized and divided into groups, which are then placed in a social hierarchy. Members may be grouped according to their gender, race, class, age, or other characteristic, depending on whatever criteria are important to that society. Some groups will be ranked higher in the social strata (levels), while others will fall into the lower ranks. The higher-level groups enjoy more access to the rewards and resources within that society, leaving lower-level groups with less.

This unequal distribution of wealth, power, and prestige results in what is called **social inequality**. We find several different systems of stratification operating in the United States, where it is not hard to demonstrate that being wealthy, white, or male typically confers a higher status (and all that goes along with it) on a person than does being poor, nonwhite, or female. Because social inequality affects a person's life experience so profoundly, it is worthwhile to examine how stratification works.

There are four basic principles of social stratification. First, it is a characteristic of a society, rather than a reflection of individual differences. For instance, if we say that in Japan men rank higher in the social hierarchy than women, this doesn't mean that a particular woman, such as actress Ryoko Hirosue, couldn't attain a higher status than a particular man; it means only that in Japan as a whole, men rank higher. Second, social stratification persists over generations. In Great Britain, a child inherits not only physical characteristics such as race but also other indicators of class standing such as regional accent. It is because of this principle of stratification that wealthy families remain so through many generations.

Third, while all societies stratify their members, different societies use different criteria for ranking them. For instance, the criterion in industrialized nations is material wealth (social class), but in hunter-gatherer societies, such as the Khoisan Bushmen of southern Africa, who are egalitarian, it is gender. Fourth, social stratification is maintained through beliefs that are widely shared by members of society. In the United States, it is still common to think that people are poor not only because of the existing class structure but also because they have somehow failed to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps."

Systems of Stratification

In order to better understand social stratification, it is useful to examine different historical periods and to make global comparisons across cultures. So here we look at three major systems of stratification: slavery, caste, and social class.

Slavery

Slavery, the most extreme system of social stratification, relegates people to the status of property, mainly for the purpose of providing labor for the slave owner. Slaves can thus be bought and sold like any other commodity. They aren't paid for their labor and in fact are forced to work under mental or physical threat. Occupying the lowest rank in the social hierarchy, slaves have none of the rights common to free members of the same societies in which they live.

Slavery has been practiced since the earliest times (the Bible features stories of

social stratification the division of society into groups arranged in a social hierarchy

social inequality the unequal distribution of wealth, power, or prestige among members of a society

slavery the most extreme form of social stratification, based on the legal ownership of people

the Israelites as slaves) and has continued for millennia in South America, Europe, and the United States. Sometimes the race, nationality, or religion of the slave owners was the same as the slaves', as was the case in ancient Greece and Rome. Historically, a person could become enslaved in one of several ways. One way was through debt; a person who couldn't repay what he owed might be taken into slavery by his creditor. Another way was through warfare: groups of vanquished soldiers might become slaves to the victors, and the women and children of the losing side could also be taken into slavery. A person who was caught committing a crime could become a slave as a kind of punishment and as a means of compensating the victim. And some slaves were captured and kidnapped, as was the case of the transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas.

Slavery as an economic system was profitable for the slave owner. In most systems of slavery, people were slaves for life, doing work in agriculture, construction, mining, or domestic service, and sometimes in the military, industry, or commerce. Their children would become slaves too, thus making the owner a greater profit. In some systems, however, slavery was temporary, and some slaves could buy their own freedom.

Slavery is now prohibited by every nation in the world, as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Not only is it illegal, it is considered immoral as well. Nevertheless, the shocking fact is that it continues to exist today in such places as India, South Asia, and West Africa in the form of child slavery, serfdom, forced and bonded laborers, human trafficking, and sex slaves. Using a somewhat broader definition of slavery, some have estimated that there are 25 million people in slavery today, more than at any other time in human history (Bales 2000).

Caste

Caste represents another type of social stratification found in various parts of the world. The traditional **caste system** is based on heredity, whereby whole groups of people are born into a certain stratum. Castes may be differentiated along religious, economic, or political lines, as well as by skin color or other physical characteristics. The caste system creates a highly stratified society where there is little or no chance of a person changing her position within the hierarchy, no matter what she may achieve individually. Members must marry within their own group, and their caste ranking is passed on to their children. In general, members of higher-ranking castes tend to be more prosperous, whereas members of lower-ranking castes tend to have fewer material resources and may live in abject poverty and suffer discrimination.

caste system a form of social stratification in which status is determined by one's family history and background and cannot be changed

apartheid the system of segregation of racial and ethnic groups that was legal in South Africa between 1948 and 1991

India is the country most closely associated with the caste system, based there in the Hindu (majority) religion. The caste system ranks individuals into one of five categories: Brahman (scholars and priests), ksatriya or chhetri (rulers and warriors), vaisya (merchants and traders), sudra (farmers, artisans, and laborers), and the untouchables (social outcasts). The caste system is a reflection of what Hindus call *karma*, the complex moral law of cause and effect that governs the universe (S. P. Cohen 2001). According to this belief, membership in a particular caste is seen as a well-deserved reward or punishment for virtuous or sinful behavior in a past life. Caste is thus considered a spiritual rather than material status. Caste-related segregation and discrimination were prohibited in 1949 by India's constitution, but they are still prevalent. Resistance to social change remains, and thus far the social ramifications of the caste system have not been completely dismantled.

THE CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA An interesting example of the caste system was the **apartheid** system, a legal separation of racial and ethnic groups that was enforced between 1948 and 1991 in South Africa. The term itself literally means "apartness" in Afrikaans and Dutch. The consequence of apartheid was to create great disparity among those in the different strata of society.

South Africans were legally classified into four main racial groups: white (English and Dutch heritage), Indian (from India), "colored" (mixed race) and black. Blacks formed a large majority, at 60 percent of the population. These groups were geographically and socially separated from one another. Blacks were forcibly removed from almost 80 percent of the country, which was reserved for the three minority groups, and relocated to independent "homelands" similar to the Indian reservations in the United States. They could not enter other parts of the country without a pass—usually in order to work as "guest laborers" in white areas. Ironically, African Americans visiting South Africa were given "honorary white" status and could move freely within white and nonwhite areas. Social services for whites and nonwhites were separate as well: schools, hospitals, buses, trains, parks, beaches, libraries, theaters, public restrooms, and even graveyards were segregated. Indians and "coloreds" were also discriminated against, though they usually led slightly more privileged lives than blacks. Despite claims of "separate but equal," the standard of living among whites far exceeded that of any other group.

In South Africa under the apartheid system, whites held all the political, economic, and social power. It was not long

until civil unrest and resistance to the system began developing within South Africa and among the international community. Blacks and even some whites began to organize to wage strikes and demonstrations, and sanctions were imposed by Western nations. The plights of high-profile antiapartheid leaders such as Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela became known worldwide. Pressure on the white government continued to grow, until the country was in an almost constant state of emergency. In 1991, apartheid as a legal institution was finally abolished.

Its legacy, however, has been much more difficult to dismantle. Although nonwhites now share the same rights and privileges as whites, social inequality and discrimination between the races have decreased little (Nattras and Seekings 2001; Seekings and Nattras 2005). South Africa remains a country with one of the most unequal distributions of income in the world. In 2004, 60 percent earned less than $7,000 U.S. a year, whereas just over 2 percent earned more than $50,000 per year. Blacks made up 90 percent of the poor. The restoration of land seized during apartheid is only slowly being accomplished and at a price to those making claims. In some ways, new patterns of class stratification are replacing rather than erasing old patterns of racial stratification.

Social Class

Social class, a system of stratification practiced primarily in capitalist societies, ranks groups of people according to their wealth, property, power, and prestige. It is also referred to by sociologists as **socioeconomic status (SES)**. The social class system is much less rigid than the caste system. Although children tend to "inherit" the social class of their parents, over the course of a lifetime they can move up or down levels in the strata. Strictly speaking, social class is not based on race, ethnicity, gender, or age, although, as we will learn later, there is often an overlap between class and those other variables.

Sociologists are not always in agreement about what determines class standing or where the boundaries are between different social classes. We will consider some of these disagreements after first taking a look at the United States and its system.

Social Classes in the United States

It is difficult to draw exact lines between the social classes in the United States; in fact, it may be useful to imagine them along a continuum rather than strictly divided. The most commonly identified categories are upper class, middle class, and lower class. If we want to make even finer distinctions, the middle class can also be divided into upper, middle, and lower (Wright et al. 1982). You probably have some idea of which class you belong to even if you don't know the exact definition for each category. Interestingly, most Americans claim that they belong somewhere in the middle class even when their life experience and backgrounds would suggest otherwise. While keeping in mind that the borders between the classes can be blurry, let's examine a typical model of the five different social classes.

social class a system of stratification based on access to resources such as wealth, property, power, and prestige

socioeconomic status (SES) a measure of an individual's place within a social class system; often used interchangeably with "class"

upper class a largely self-sustaining group of the wealthiest people in a class system; in the United States they constitute about 1 percent of the population and possess most of the wealth of the country

upper-middle class mostly professionals and managers, who enjoy considerable financial stability; they constitute about 14 percent of the U.S. population

The Upper Class

The **upper class** makes up just 1 percent of the U.S. population, and its total net worth is greater than that of the entire other 99 percent (Beeghley 2005). The upper class consists of elites who have gained membership in various ways. Some, like the Rockefellers and Carnegies, come into "old money" through family fortunes; others, like Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey, generate "new money" through individual achievements. Members of this class earn in excess of $250,000 per year and are often highly educated, cultured, and influential. They tend to attend private schools and prestigious universities and display a distinctive lifestyle; some seek positions of power in government or philanthropy. The upper class is largely self-sustaining, with most members remaining stable and few new ones able to gain its ranks.

The Upper-Middle Class

The **upper-middle class** comprises about 14 percent of the population. This group tends to be well educated (with college or postgraduate degrees) and highly skilled. Members work primarily in executive, managerial, and professional jobs. They may enjoy modest support from investments but generally depend on income from salaried work, making upward of $89,000 to $150,000 per year. As a result, the upper-middle class is most likely to feel some financial stability. They usually own their homes and may own a second one as well.