
Stratification, Class, and Inequality

Opening Question

Which of the founding fathers of sociology put forth ideas that have heavily influenced U.S. national politics and presidential elections in recent years?

- A. Émile Durkheim
- B. Karl Marx
- C. Max Weber

Learning Objectives

- Learn about social stratification and the importance of social background in an individual's chances for material success.
- Know the most influential theories of stratification, including those of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Erik Olin Wright.

Social Stratification

- **Social stratification:** The existence of structured inequalities between groups in society in terms of their access to material or symbolic rewards.
- While all societies involve some forms of stratification, only with the development of state-based systems did wide differences in wealth and power arise.
- The most distinctive form of stratification in modern societies is class division.

Intersectionality

- **Intersectionality:** A sociological perspective that holds that our multiple group memberships affect our lives in ways that are distinct from single group memberships. For example, the experience of a Black woman may be distinct from that of a White woman or a Black man.
- **Structured inequalities:** Social inequalities that result from patterns in the social structure.

Intersectionality

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01islM0ytkE>

8.1 Basic Concepts

Systems of Stratification

- **Slavery:** A form of social stratification in which some people are owned by others as their property.
- **Caste:** A social system in which one's social status is held for life.
- **Class systems:** A system of social hierarchy that allows individuals to move among classes. The four chief bases of class are ownership of wealth, occupation, income, and education.

Class

- **Class:** Although it is one of the most frequently used concepts in sociology, there is no clear agreement about how the notion should be defined.
- Most sociologists use the term to refer to socioeconomic variations among groups of individuals that create variations in their material prosperity and power.

Class vs. Other Types of Stratification

- Class systems differ from slavery and castes in four main ways:
 - Class systems are fluid, and movement is possible.
 - Positions are partly achieved.
 - Classes are economically based.
 - Class systems are large scale and impersonal.

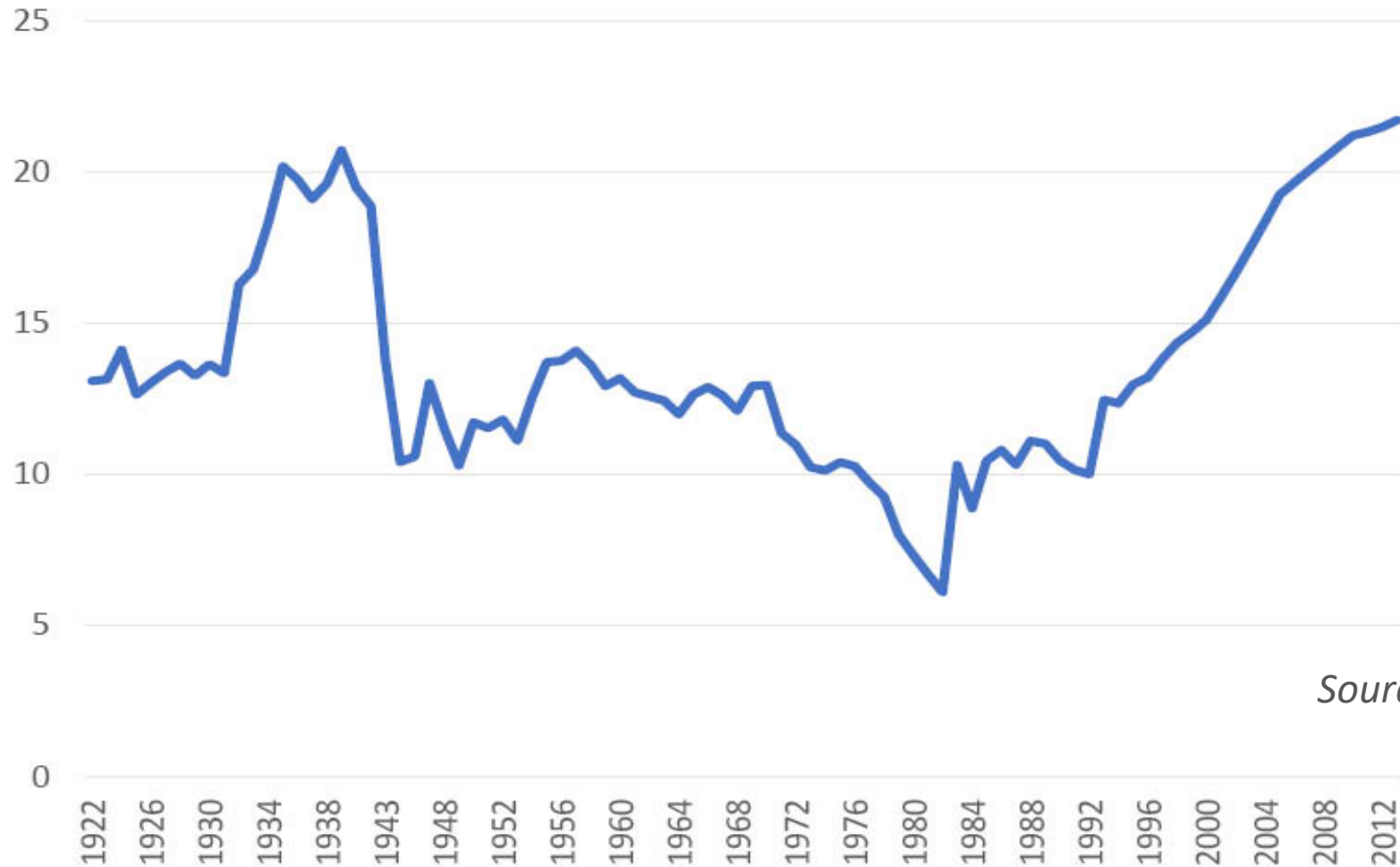
Life Chances

- **Life chances:** A term introduced by Max Weber to signify a person's opportunities for achieving economic prosperity.
- The idea of life chances is important because it emphasizes that although class is a powerful influence on what happens in our lives, it is not completely determining.

Income

- **Income:** Money received from paid wages and salaries or earned from investments.
- The increase in real income in the past century has not been distributed evenly across groups.
- Income inequality in India is increasing.

Income share of top 1% in India



Source: Chancel and Piketty (2017)

Wealth

- **Wealth:** Money and material possessions held by an individual or group.
- Wealth inequality in India mirrors income inequality.
- Some scholars argue that wealth, not income, is the real indicator of social class because it is less sensitive to fluctuations.
- Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes have persistently worse outcomes across monetary indicators.

Wealth: US Context

- The assets that an individual owns, such as cash, savings, and checking accounts and investments in stocks, bonds, and real estate
- Can be passed on from one generation to the next through inheritance
- Pronounced inequality in distribution across class groups
- Racial divisions persist

Wealth: US Context

- Why do racial inequality in wealth persist?
 - Due to historical racism, blacks and Hispanics have fewer wealth to begin with. “It takes money to make money.”
 - Due to persisting discrimination, it is easier for white to obtain assets even when they have fewer resources (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006). Studies show that blacks rejected for mortgages 60% more often than whites.
 - Disparity in education levels

Videos

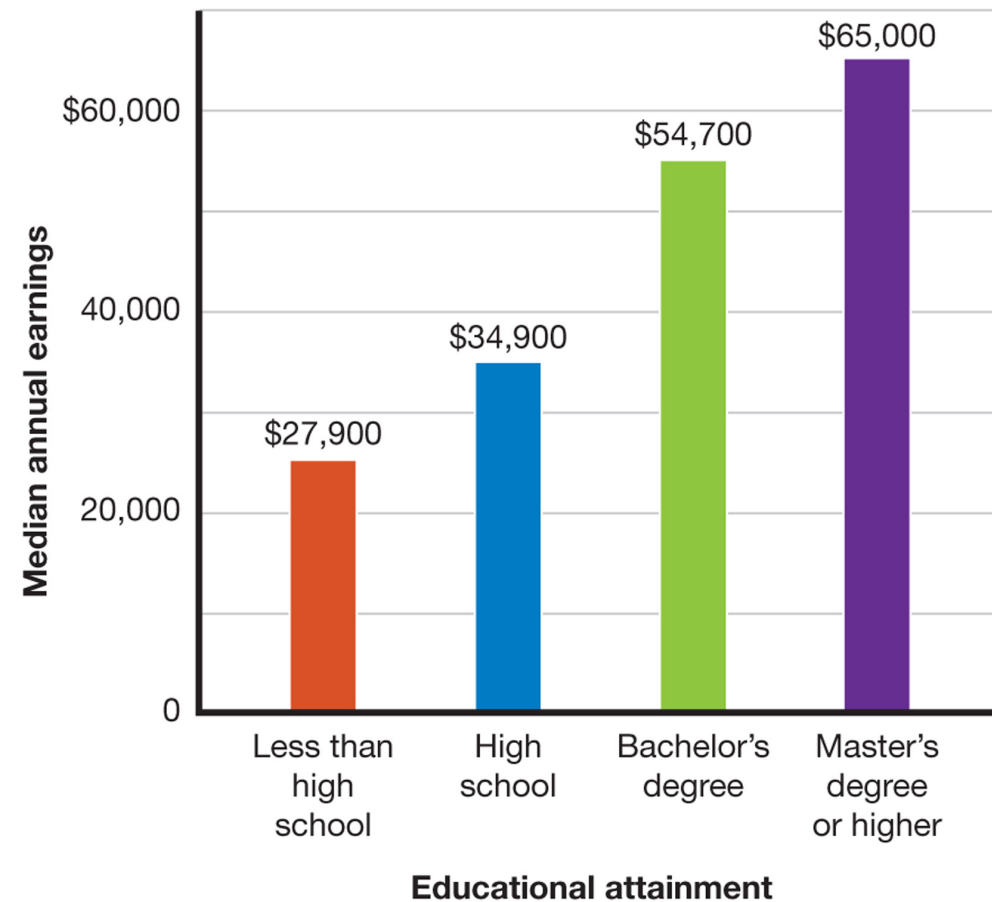
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Education

- Education is one of the strongest predictors of occupation, income, and wealth later in life.
- Caste wise differences in education persist, which partly explain caste wise differences in income and wealth.
- How much education one receives is often influenced by the social class of one's parents.

Figure 8.2
MEDIAN EARNINGS OF YOUNG ADULTS, 2018



* Represents median annual earnings of full-time, year-round workers ages 25–34.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2020.

Occupation

- Occupation is an important indicator of social standing.
- The top-ranked occupations require a fair amount of either education or public service.
- Younger Americans are more inclined to value occupations that result in fame.

Table 8.1

RELATIVE SOCIAL PRESTIGE OF SELECT U.S. OCCUPATIONS

OCCUPATION	PRESTIGE SCORE	OCCUPATION	PRESTIGE SCORE
Physician	7.6	Farm manager	5.0
Architect	6.7	Real estate agent	4.9
Dentist	6.7	Carpenter	4.6
Airline pilot	6.6	Auto body repairperson	4.3
Registered nurse	6.5	Bank teller	4.2
Lawyer	6.4	Local delivery truck driver	4.2
Veterinarian	6.4	Salesperson in a store	3.9
Computer programmer	6.0	Hair stylist	3.8
Secondary-school teacher	6.1	Day-care aide	3.6
Sociologist	6.1	Waiter/waitress	3.6
Police officer	5.9	Bartender	3.6
Member of the clergy	5.8	File clerk	3.5
Actor	5.7	Cashier in a supermarket	3.4
Firefighter	5.7	Taxi driver	3.2
Musician in a symphony orchestra	5.6	Janitor	3.0
Electrician	5.2	Door-to-door salesperson	2.9

Note: Respondents were asked to rank the occupations' prestige on a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 as the least prestigious and 9 as the most prestigious.

SOURCE: Smith and Son, 2014.

Lifestyle

- Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu saw social-class groups as identifiable according to their levels of “cultural and economic capital.”
- Stratification between and among classes depend on differences in consumption and lifestyle in addition to occupational differences.
- The reproduction of social inequalities are still primarily influenced by economic factors, which reduce the amount of choice people have about their lifestyles.

Introduction to Social Mobility

Social Mobility

- Inequality of opportunity
- Life Chances: Birth social class, geography, ancestry, race, ethnicity, age, gender
- Standard of Living: Income, employment, poverty rates, housing affordability, quality of life

Types of Social Mobility

- Upward mobility
- Downward mobility
- *Intergenerational* mobility
- *Intragenerational* mobility
- Structural Mobility

Types of Social Mobility

Upward mobility

- “The American Dream,” “rags to riches,” etc.

Downward mobility

- Unemployment, business setbacks, illness, divorce

Intergenerational mobility

- Mobility between generations: are we better or worse off than the generation before us?

Intragenerational mobility

- Status changes within one’s own lifetime

Structural Mobility

- Societal change which enables group movement
- Societal level (not individual)- example: outsourcing of manufacturing jobs

8.2 Theories Of Stratification In Modern Societies

Marx: Capitalism and the Analysis of Class

- **Means of production:** The means whereby the production of material goods is carried on in a society, including not just technology but also the social relations between producers.
- **Bourgeoisie:** People who own companies, land, or stocks (shares) and use these to generate economic returns.
- **Proletariat:** People who sell their labor for wages, according to Marx.
- According to Marx, the relationship between classes is exploitative.

Marx: Capitalism and the Analysis of Class

- **Surplus value:** In Marxist theory, the value of a worker's labor power left over when an employer has repaid the cost of hiring the worker.
- Marx believed a capitalist system would result in increasing class divide until the working class overthrows the capitalism system and replaces it with a classless society.
- **Communism:** A social system based on everyone owning the means of production and sharing in the wealth it produces.

Marx: Capitalism and the Analysis of Class

- Marx
 - was right about persistent poverty in industrialized countries & in anticipating continued inequalities of wealth & income
 - was wrong in supposing that the income of most of the population would remain extremely low
 - Was wrong in believing that a classless society-a communist utopia in which everyone shared equally in the fruits of their common labor-would inevitably result –unless that classless society is yet to come!!

Weber: Class and Status

- According to Weber, class divisions derive from both one's relationship to the control of the means of production as well as economic differences that are unrelated to property, such as skills and credentials.
- **Status:** The social honor or prestige a particular group is accorded by other members of a society.
 - Status groups normally display distinct styles of life—patterns of behavior that the members of a group follow.
 - Status privilege may be positive or negative.

Weber: Class and Status

- **Pariah groups:** Groups who suffer from negative status discrimination—they are looked down on by most other members of society.
- Class is an objective measure, but status depends on people's subjective evaluations of social differences.
- Weber argued that social classes also differ with respect to their power, or ability to enact change, command resources, or make decisions.

Davis and Moore: The Functions of Stratification

- Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore argued that social stratification and social inequality are functional because they ensure that the most qualified people, attracted by the rewards society bestows, will fill the roles that are most important to a smoothly functioning society.
- Critics point out that the functional importance of roles is difficult to measure, social rewards do not accurately reflect importance, and that stratification limits the discovery of talent in a society.

Erik Olin Wright: Contradictory Class Locations (1 of 2)

- Wright incorporated concepts from Marx and Weber to classify three dimensions of control over resources:
 - Control over investments or money capital
 - Control over the physical means of production
 - Control over labor power
- **Contradictory class locations:** Positions in the class structure, particularly routine white-collar and lower managerial jobs, that share characteristics with the class positions both above and below them.

Erik Olin Wright: Contradictory Class Locations (part 2 of 2)

- According to Wright, two factors differentiate class locations.
 - The relationship to authority: Many middle-class workers (such as managers and supervisors) enjoy relationships to authority that are more privileged than those of the working class.
 - The possession of skills or expertise: Middle-class employees possessing skills that are in demand in the labor market earn a higher wage in the capitalist system.

Table 8.2

APPLYING SOCIOLOGY TO STRATIFICATION

CONCEPTS	APPROACH TO INEQUALITY	CURRENT APPLICATION
Marxist Theories	The exploitation of working classes in capitalist societies is the key to understanding social and economic inequality in the contemporary world.	The presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders, which gained wide traction in 2016 and 2020, were inspired in part by Marxist ideas
Weberian Theories	Status and power are as important as class in our understanding of social and economic inequality.	Journalists, writers, and scholars in an unequal society like the United States can hold status and exert power despite owning little capital.
Functionalist Theories	Inequality can be beneficial to society in so far as it inspires people to develop the skills and expertise necessary to excel at difficult jobs.	Entry level jobs in computer science are among the best paid, resulting in wide disparities between graduates in that field and most others. Computer science courses are among the most difficult at most universities, lending credence to a functional theory.
Contradictory Class Locations (theory developed by Erik Olin Wright in the 1980s, when the middle class was at the height of its political power)	Professional workers in modern capitalist society occupy contradictory positions: they exert control over the working classes, but remain subordinate to the upper classes.	This theory is of less relevance today than when it was developed in the 1980s. As Erik Olin Wright has observed, both the working class and the shrinking, downwardly mobile middle class of the twenty-first century is losing power due to a “capitalist class... so immensely wealthy that they are capable of destroying the world as a side effect of their private pursuit of gain.”