

# Systems of Social Stratification

**S**ome of the world's nations are wealthy, others poor, and some in between. This layering of nations, and of groups of people within a nation, is called *social stratification*. Social stratification is one of the most significant topics we shall discuss in this book, for it affects our life chances—from our access to material possessions to the age at which we die as you saw in the opening vignette.

Social stratification also affects the way we think about life. If you had been born into the Ethiopian family in our opening vignette, for example, you would be illiterate and would expect your children to be the same. You also would expect hunger to be a part of life and would not be too surprised when people die young. To be born into either of the other two families, however, would give you quite a different picture of the world.

**Social stratification** is a system in which groups of people are divided into layers according to their relative power, property, and prestige. It is important to realize that social stratification does not refer to individuals. It is a *way of ranking large groups of people in a hierarchy that shows their relative privileges*.

It is also important to note that *every society stratifies its members*. Some, like agricultural societies, draw firm lines that separate group from group, while others, like hunting and gathering societies, show greater equality. Regardless of its forms, however, the existence of social stratification is universal. Let's look at four major systems of social stratification: slavery, caste, estate, and class.

## Slavery

Slavery, whose essential characteristic is *ownership of some people by others*, has been common in world history. The Old Testament even lays out rules for how owners should treat their slaves. So does the Koran. The Romans had slaves, as did the Africans and Greeks. In classical Greece and Rome, slaves did the work, freeing citizens to engage in politics and the arts. Slavery was least common among nomads, especially hunters and gatherers, and most common in agricultural societies (Landtman 1938/1968). As we examine the major causes and conditions of slavery, you will see how remarkably it has varied around the world.

**Causes of Slavery** Contrary to popular assumption, slavery was not usually based on racism, but on one of three other factors. The first was debt. In some societies, creditors could enslave people who could not pay their debts. The second was crime. Instead of being killed, a murderer or thief might be enslaved by the family of the victim as compensation for their loss. The third was war and conquest. When one group of people conquered another, they often enslaved some of the vanquished (Starna and Watkins 1991). Historian Gerda Lerner (1986) notes that the first people enslaved through warfare were women. When tribal men raided a village or camp, they killed the men, raped the women, and then brought the women back as slaves. The women were valued for sexual purposes, for reproduction, and for their labor.

Roughly twenty-five hundred years ago, when Greece was but a collection of city-states, slavery was common. A city that became powerful and conquered another city would enslave some of the vanquished. Both slaves and slaveholders were Greek. Similarly, when Rome became the supreme power about two thousand years ago, following the custom of the time, the Romans enslaved some of the Greeks they had conquered. More educated than their conquerors, some of these slaves served as tutors in Roman homes. Slavery, then, was a sign of debt, of crime, or of defeat in battle. It was not a sign that the slave was inherently inferior.

**Conditions of Slavery** The conditions of slavery have varied widely around the world. *In some cases, slavery was temporary.* Slaves of the Israelites were set free in the year of jubilee, which occurred every fifty years. Roman slaves ordinarily had the right to buy

**social stratification** the division of large numbers of people into layers according to their relative power, property, and prestige; applies to both nations and to people within a nation, society, or other group

**slavery** a form of social stratification in which some people own other people

As you can see from this 1864 photo taken on Whitehall Street in Atlanta, Georgia, under slavery, humans are bought and sold the same as commodities such as dishes. (Note the sign at the top of the building: China/Glass/Queensware.)





**bonded labor, or indentured service** a contractual system in which someone sells his or her body (services) for a specified period of time in an arrangement very close to slavery, except that it is voluntarily entered into

During my research in India, I interviewed this 8 year-old girl. Mahashury is a bonded laborer who was exchanged by her parents for a 2,000 rupee loan (about \$14). To repay the loan, Mahashury must do construction work for one year. She will receive one meal a day and one set of clothing for the year. Because this centuries-old practice is now illegal, the master bribes Indian officials, who inform him when they are going to inspect the construction site. He then hides his bonded laborers. I was able to interview and photograph Mahashury because her master was absent the day I visited the construction site.



themselves out of slavery. They knew what their purchase price was, and some were able to meet this price by striking a bargain with their owner and selling their services to others. In most instances, however, slavery was a lifelong condition. Some criminals, for example, became slaves when they were given life sentences as oarsmen on Roman war ships. There they served until death, which often came quickly to those in this exhausting service.

*Slavery was not necessarily inheritable.* In most places, the children of slaves were automatically slaves themselves. But in some instances, the child of a slave who served a rich family might even be adopted by that family, becoming an heir who bore the family name along with the other sons or daughters of the household. In ancient Mexico, the children of slaves were always free (Landtman 1938/1968:271).

*Slaves were not necessarily powerless and poor.* In almost all instances, slaves owned no property and had no power. Among some groups, however, slaves could accumulate property and even rise to high positions in the community. Occasionally, a slave might even become wealthy, loan money to the master, and, while still a slave, own slaves himself or herself (Landtman 1938/1968). This, however, was rare.

**Slavery in the New World** A gray area between a contract and slavery is **bonded labor**, also called **indentured service**. Many people who wanted to start a new life in the American colonies were unable to pay their passage. Ship captains would transport them on credit, and colonists would “buy their paper” when they arrived. This arrangement provided passage for the penniless, payment for the ship’s captain, and, for wealthier colonists, servants for a set number of years. During that specified period, the servants were required by law to serve their master. If they ran away, they became outlaws and were captured and forcibly returned. At the end of the period of indenture, they became full citizens, able to live where they chose and free to sell their labor (Main 1965; Elkins 1968).

When there were not enough indentured servants to meet their growing need for labor, the colonists tried to enslave Native Americans. This attempt, however, failed miserably. One reason was that when Native Americans escaped they knew how to survive in the wilderness and were able to make their way back to their tribe. The colonists then turned to Africans, who were being brought to North and South America by the Dutch, English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Because slavery has a broad range of causes, some analysts conclude that racism didn’t lead to slavery, but, rather, slavery led to racism. Finding it profitable to make people slaves for life, U.S. slave owners developed an **ideology**, beliefs that justify social arrangements. Ideology leads to a picture of the world that makes current social arrangements seem inevitable, necessary, and fair. The colonists developed the view that the slaves were inferior. Some even said that they were not fully human. In short, the colonists developed elaborate justifications for slavery, built on the presumed superiority of their own group.

To make slavery even more profitable, slave states passed laws that made slavery *inheritable*; that is, the babies born to slaves became the property of the slave owners (Stampp 1956). These children could be sold, bartered, or traded. To strengthen their control, slave states passed laws making it illegal for slaves to hold meetings or to be away from the master’s premises without carrying a pass (Lerner 1972). As sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1935/1966:12) noted, “gradually the entire white South became an armed camp to keep Negroes in slavery and to kill the black rebel.”

Patterns of legal discrimination did not end after the Civil War. For example, until 1954 the states operated two separate school systems. Even until the 1950s, in order to keep the races from “mixing,” it was illegal in Mississippi for a white and an African American to sit together on the same seat of a car! The reason there was no outright ban on blacks and whites being in the same car was to allow for African American chauffeurs.



**Slavery Today** Slavery has again reared its ugly head, this time in Sudan, Mauritania, and the Ivory Coast (Tandia 2001; Bales 2002; Del Castillo 2002). This region has a long history of slavery, and it was not until 1980 that slavery was officially abolished in Mauritania, and not until 1987 in Sudan (Ayittey 1998). Although officially abolished, slavery continues. Enslavement of members of the Dinka tribe in Sudan is the topic of the Mass Media box below.

**ideology** beliefs about the way things ought to be that justify social arrangements

# massMEDIA

## in Social Life

### What Price Freedom? Slavery Today

Children of the Dinka tribe in rural Sudan don't go to school. They work. Their families depend on them to tend the cattle that are so important to their way of life.

On the morning of the raid, ten-year-old Adhieu had been watching the cattle. "We were very happy because we would soon leave the cattle camps and return home to our parents. But in the morning, there was shooting. There was yelling and crying everywhere. My uncle grabbed me by the hand, and we ran. We swam across the river. I saw some children drowning. We hid behind a rock."

By morning's end, 500 children were either dead or enslaved. Their attackers were their fellow countrymen—Arabs from northern Sudan. The children who were captured were forced to march hundreds of miles north. Some escaped on the way. Others tried to—and were shot (Akol 1998).

Tens of thousands of Dinkas have been killed or enslaved since civil war broke out in Sudan in the 1980s. Yet the Arab-led government—the National Islamic Front—insists that slavery does not exist. It claims it is an invention of foreign politicians, Christian humanitarians, and hostile foreign media (Akol 1998). But there are too many witnesses and too much documentation by human rights groups. There also are devastating accounts by journalists: Public television (PBS) has even run film footage of captive children in chains. And then there are the slaves who manage to escape, who recount their ordeal in horrifying detail (Dottridge 2001; Salopek 2003).

The United States bombed Kosovo into submission for its crimes against humanity, yet it has remained silent in the face of this outrage. A cynic might say that Kosovo was located at a politically strategic spot in Eu-



*In this photo, a representative of the Liason Agency Network (on the left) is buying the freedom of the Sudanese slaves (in the background).*

rope, whereas Sudan occupies an area of Africa in which the U.S. and European powers have little interest. A cynic might add that these powers fear Arab retaliation, which might take the form of oil embargoes and terrorism. A cynic might also suggest that outrages against black Africans are not as significant to these powers as those against white Europeans. Finally, a cynic might add that this will change as the oil below the surface of Sudan becomes more important.

Appalled by the lack of response on the part of the world's most powerful governments, private groups have stepped in. Christian Solidarity International (CSI), based in Zurich, Switzerland uses a controversial technique. Arab "retrievers" go to northern Sudan, where they either buy or abduct slaves. Walking by night and hiding by day, they elude security forces and bring the slaves south. There, CSI pays the retrievers \$50 per slave (Mabry 1999).

As CBS news cameras rolled, the rescuer paid the slave trader \$50,000 in Sudanese

pounds. At \$50 per person, the bundle of bills was enough to free 1,000 slaves. The liberated slaves, mostly women and children, were then free to return to their villages. (Jacobs 1999)

Critics claim that buying slaves, even to free them, encourages slavery. The money provides motivation to enslave people in order to turn around and sell them. Fifty dollars is a lot of money in Sudan, where the average income for an entire year is \$1,520 (Haub 2002). It is also the value of two or three goats (Gaviak 2000).

That is a bogus argument, replies CSI. What is intolerable is to leave women and children in slavery where they are deprived of their freedom and families, and beaten and raped by brutal masters.

CSI claims to have purchased the freedom of about 40,000 slaves (Dottridge 2001). No one knows how many people remain in slavery.

#### for your CONSIDERATION

What do you think about buying the freedom of slaves? Can you suggest a workable alternative? Why do you think the U.S. government has remained inactive about this issue for so long, when it invades other countries for human rights abuses? Do you think that, perhaps, its excursions into such places as Haiti and Kosovo were politically motivated, that they had little to do with human rights? If not, why the silence in the face of slavery?

The media coverage of this issue has motivated many Americans to become active in freeing slaves. High schools—and even grade schools—are raising money to participate in slave buy-back programs (Schaefer 1999). If you were a school principal, would you encourage this practice? Why or why not?



**caste system** a form of social stratification in which one's status is determined by birth and is lifelong

**endogamy** the practice of marrying within one's own group

## Caste

The second system of social stratification is caste. In a **caste system**, status is determined by birth and is lifelong. Someone born into a low-status group will always have low status, no matter how much that person may accomplish in life. In sociological terms, the basis of a caste system is ascribed status (discussed on page 97). Achieved status cannot change an individual's place in this system.

Societies with this form of stratification try to make certain that the boundaries between castes remain firm. They practice **endogamy**, marriage within their own group, and prohibit intermarriage. To reduce contact between castes, they even develop elaborate rules about *ritual pollution*, teaching that contact with inferior castes contaminates the superior caste.

**India's Religious Castes** India provides the best example of a caste system. Based not on race but on religion, India's caste system has existed for almost three thousand years (Chandra 1993; Guru and Sidhva 2001). India's four main castes are depicted in Table 9.1. These four castes are subdivided into about two thousand subcastes, or *jati*. Each *jati* has an occupational specialty. For example, one subcaste washes clothes, another sharpens knives, and yet another repairs shoes.

The lowest group listed in Table 9.1, the Dalit, make up India's "untouchables." If a Dalit touches someone of a higher caste, that person becomes unclean. Even the shadow of an untouchable can contaminate. Early morning and late afternoons are especially risky, for the long shadows of these periods pose a danger to everyone higher up the caste system. Consequently, Dalits are not allowed in some villages during these times. Anyone who becomes contaminated must follow *ablution*, or washing rituals, to restore purity (Lannoy 1975).

Although the Indian government formally abolished the caste system in 1949, centuries-old practices cannot be so easily eliminated, and the caste system remains part of everyday life in India. The ceremonies people follow at births, marriages, and deaths, for example, are dictated by caste (Chandra 1993). The upper castes dread the upward mobility of the untouchables, whom they detest. On occasion, they even resist it with violence and ritual suicide (Crossette 1996; Filkins 1997; Deliege 2001).

**Table 9.1 India's Caste System**

Caste	Occupation
Brahman	Priests and teachers
Kshatriya	Rulers and soldiers
Vaishya	Merchants and traders
Shudra	Peasants and laborers
Dalit (untouchables)	The outcastes; degrading or polluting labor

*In a caste system, status is determined by birth and is lifelong. At birth, these women received not only membership in a lower caste but also, because of their gender, a predetermined position in that caste. When I photographed these women, they were carrying sand to the second floor of a house being constructed in Andhra Pradesh, India.*





An untouchable summed up his situation in life this way:

At the tea stalls, we have separate cups to drink from, chipped and caked with dirt. We have to walk for 15 minutes to carry water to our homes, because we're not allowed to use the taps in the village that the upper castes use. We're not allowed into temples. When I attended school, my friends and I were forced to sit outside the classroom. The upper caste children would not allow us even to touch the football they played with. We played with stones instead. (Guru and Sidhva 2001)

**South Africa** Until recently, South Africa provided another example of social stratification based on caste. Europeans of Dutch descent, a numerical minority called Afrikaners, controlled the government, the police, and the military. They used these sources of power to enforce a system called **apartheid** (ah-PAR-tate), the separation of the races. Everyone was classified by law into one of four groups: Europeans (whites), Africans (blacks), Coloureds (mixed races), and Asians. These classifications determined where people could live, work, and go to school. It also established where they could swim or see movies—for by law whites were not allowed to mix socially with the others.

After years of trade sanctions, sports boycotts, and other pressure, Afrikaners reluctantly dismantled their caste system. Black Africans no longer carry special passes, public facilities are integrated, and all racial-ethnic groups have the right to vote and to hold office. Although apartheid has been dismantled, its legacy haunts South Africa. Whites still dominate the country's social institutions, and most blacks remain uneducated and poor. Many new rights—such as the right to higher education, to eat in restaurants, even to see a doctor—are of little use to people who can't afford them. Political violence has been replaced by old-fashioned crime. South Africa's murder rate, the highest in the world, runs *nine times* higher than the extraordinary U.S. rate ("South African . . ." 2001). Apartheid's legacy of prejudice, bitterness, and hatred is destined to fuel racial tensions for generations.

**A U.S. Racial Caste System** Before leaving the subject of caste, we should note that when slavery ended in the United States, it was replaced by a *racial caste system*, in which everyone was marked for life from the moment of birth (Berger 1963/2003). In this system, *all* whites, even if they were poor and uneducated, considered themselves to have a higher status than *all* African Americans. As in India and South Africa, the upper caste, fearing pollution from the lower caste, prohibited intermarriage and insisted on separate schools, hotels, restaurants, and even toilets and drinking fountains in public facilities. When any white met any African American on a southern sidewalk, the African American had to move aside—which the untouchables of India still must do when they meet someone of a higher caste (Deliege 2001).

## Estate

During the middle ages, Europe developed the **estate stratification system**. There were three groups, or estates. The *first* estate was made up of the nobility, the wealthy families who ruled the country. They owned the land, which was the source of wealth at that time. The nobility did no farming themselves, or any "work" for that matter. Work was considered beneath their dignity, something to be done by servants. The nobility's responsibility was to administer their lands, and to live "genteel" lives worthy of their high position.

The *second* estate consisted of the clergy. The Roman Catholic Church was a political power at this time. It also owned vast amounts of land and collected taxes from everyone who lived within the boundaries of a parish. The church's power was so great that to be crowned, kings had to obtain the pope's permission.

To prevent its vast lands from being carved into smaller chunks, the nobility practiced *primogeniture*, allowing only firstborn sons to inherit land. The other sons had to find some way to support themselves, and joining the clergy was a favored way. (Other ways were becoming an officer in the military or practicing law.) The church was appealing because priests had a lifetime position and were guaranteed a comfortable living. At that time, the church sold offices, and the wealthy could buy the position of bishop, for example, which guaranteed a high income.

**apartheid** the separation of racial-ethnic groups as was practiced in South Africa

**estate stratification system** the stratification system of medieval Europe, consisting of three groups or estates: the nobility, clergy, and commoners



**class system** a form of social stratification based primarily on the possession of money or material possessions

**social mobility** movement up or down the social class ladder

The *third* estate consisted of the commoners. Known as *serfs*, they belonged to the land. If someone bought or inherited land, the serfs came with it. Serfs were born into the third estate, and they died within it, too. The rare person who made it out of the third estate was a man who was knighted for extraordinary bravery in battle or someone “called” into a religious vocation.

**Women in the Estate System** Women belonged to the estate of their husbands. Women in the first estate had no occupation, for, like their husbands, work was considered beneath their dignity. Their responsibility was to administer the household, overseeing the servants. Women were not members of the second estate, as the Roman Catholic clergy did not marry. Women of the third estate shared the hard life of their husbands, including physical labor and food shortages. In addition, they faced the peril of rape by men of the first estate. A few commoners who caught the eye of men of the first estate did marry and join them in the first estate. This, however, was rare.

## Class

As we have seen, stratification systems based on slavery, caste, and estate are rigid. The lines drawn between people are firm and there is little or no movement from one group to another. A **class system**, in contrast, is much more open, for it is based primarily on money or material possessions, which can be acquired. It, too, begins at birth, when individuals are ascribed the status of their parents, but, unlike these other systems, people can change their social class by what they achieve (or fail to achieve) in life. In addition, no laws specify people’s occupations on the basis of birth or prohibit marriage between the classes.

A major characteristic of the class system, then, is its relatively fluid boundaries. A class system allows **social mobility**, movement up or down the class ladder. The potential for improving one’s life—or for falling down the class ladder—is a major force that drives people to go far in school and to work hard. In the extreme, the family background that a child inherits at birth may present such obstacles that he or she has little chance of climbing very far—or it may provide such privileges that it makes it almost impossible to fall down the class ladder.

This cartoon of political protest appeared in London newspapers in 1843. It illustrates the severe exploitation of labor that occurred during early capitalism, which stimulated Marx to analyze relations between capitalists and workers.

## Global Stratification and the Status of Females

In every society of the world, gender is a basis for social stratification. In no society is gender the sole basis for stratifying people, but gender cuts across *all* systems of social stratification—whether slavery, caste, estate, or class (Huber 1990). In all these systems, on the basis of their gender, people are sorted into categories and given different access to the good things available in their society.

Apparently these distinctions always favor males. It is remarkable, for example, that in *every* society of the world men’s earnings are higher than women’s. Men’s dominance is even more evident when we consider female circumcision (see the box on page 300). That most of the world’s illiterate are females drives home women’s relative position. Of the several hundred million adults who cannot read, about 60 percent are women (“Fighting Illiteracy . . .” 2000). Because gender is so significant for what happens to us in life, we shall devote a separate chapter to this topic (Chapter 11).



## What Determines Social Class?

In the early days of sociology, a disagreement arose about the meaning of social class. Let’s compare how Marx and Weber analyzed the issue.





Taken at the end of the 1800s, these photos illustrate the contrasting worlds of social classes produced by capitalism. The sleeping boys shown in this classic 1890 photo by Jacob Riis sold newspapers in London. They did not go to school, and they had no home. The children on the right, Cornelius and Gladys Vanderbilt, are shown in front of their parents' estate. They went to school and did not work. You can see how the life situations illustrated in these photos would have produced different orientations to life—and, therefore, politics, ideas about marriage, values, and so on—the stuff of which life is made.

## Karl Marx: The Means of Production

As discussed in Chapter 1, Karl Marx (1818–1883) witnessed the effects of societies in upheaval. When the feudal system broke up, masses of peasants were displaced from their traditional lands and occupations. Fleeing to cities, they competed for the few available jobs. Offered only a pittance for their labor, they dressed in rags, went hungry, and slept under bridges and in shacks. In contrast, the factory owners built mansions, hired servants, and lived in the lap of luxury. Seeing this great disparity between owners and workers, Marx concluded that social class depends on a single factor—the **means of production**—the tools, factories, land, and investment capital used to produce wealth (Marx 1844/1964; Marx and Engels 1848/1967).

Marx argued that the distinctions people often make among themselves—such as clothing, speech, education, income, or, today, even the car they drive—are superficial matters. These things camouflage the only dividing line that counts. There are just two classes of people, said Marx: the **bourgeoisie**, those who own the means of production, and the **proletariat**, those who work for the owners. In short, people's relationship to the means of production determines their social class.

Marx did recognize other groups: farmers and peasants; a *lumpenproletariat* (marginal people such as beggars, vagrants, and criminals); and a middle group of self-employed professionals. Marx did not consider these groups social classes, however, for they lacked **class consciousness**—a shared identity based on their position in the means of production. They did not perceive themselves as exploited workers whose plight could be solved by collective action. Consequently, Marx thought of these groups as insignificant in the coming workers' revolution destined to overthrow capitalism.

The capitalists will grow even wealthier, Marx said, and the hostilities will increase. When workers come to realize that capitalists are the source of their oppression, they will unite and throw off the chains of their oppressors. In a bloody revolution, they will seize the means of production and usher in a classless society, where no longer will the few grow rich at the expense of the many. What holds back the workers' unity and their revolution is **false consciousness**, workers mistakenly thinking of themselves as capitalists. For example, workers with a few dollars in the bank may forget that they are workers and instead see themselves as investors, or as capitalists who are about to launch a successful business.

The only distinction worth mentioning, then, is whether a person is an owner or a worker. This decides everything else, Marx stressed, for property determines people's lifestyles, shapes their ideas, and establishes their relationships with one another.

## Max Weber: Property, Prestige, and Power

Max Weber (1864–1920) became an outspoken critic of Marx. Weber argued that property is only part of the picture. Social class, he said, is made up of three components—

**means of production** the tools, factories, land, and investment capital used to produce wealth

**bourgeoisie** Karl Marx's term for capitalists, those who own the means of production

**proletariat** Marx's term for the exploited class, the mass of workers who do not own the means of production

**class consciousness** Karl Marx's term for awareness of a common identity based on one's position in the means of production

**false consciousness** (or false class consciousness) Karl Marx's term to refer to workers identifying with the interests of capitalists



property, prestige, and power (Gerth and Mills 1958; Weber 1922/1968). Some call these the three P's of social class. (Although Weber used the terms *class*, *status*, and *power*, some sociologists find *property*, *prestige*, and *power* to be clearer terms. To make them even clearer, you may wish to substitute *wealth* for *property*.)

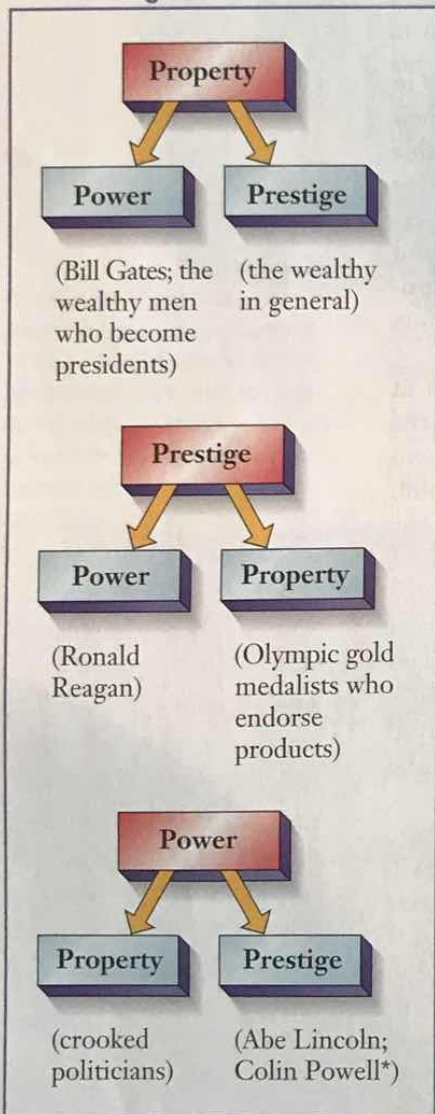
*Property* (or wealth), said Weber, is certainly significant in determining a person's standing in society. On that point he agreed with Marx. But, added Weber, ownership is not the only significant aspect of property. For example, some powerful people, such as managers of corporations, *control* the means of production although they do not *own* them. If managers can control property for their own benefit—awarding themselves huge bonuses and magnificent perks—it makes no practical difference that they do not own the property that they so generously use for their own benefit.

*Prestige*, the second element in Weber's analysis, is often derived from property, for people tend to admire the wealthy. Prestige, however, can also be based on other factors.

Olympic gold medalists, for example, may not own property, yet they have high prestige. Some are even able to exchange their prestige for property—such as those who are paid a small fortune for claiming that they start their day with “the breakfast of champions.” In other words, property and prestige are not one-way streets: Although property can bring prestige, prestige can also bring property.

*Power*, the third element of social class, is the ability to control others, even over their objections. Weber agreed with Marx that property is a major source of power, but he added that it is not the only source. For example, prestige can be turned into power. Perhaps the best example is Ronald Reagan, an actor who became president of the most powerful country in the world. Figure 9.1 shows how property, prestige, and power are interrelated.

**Figure 9.1** Weber's Three Components of Social Class: Interrelationships Among Them

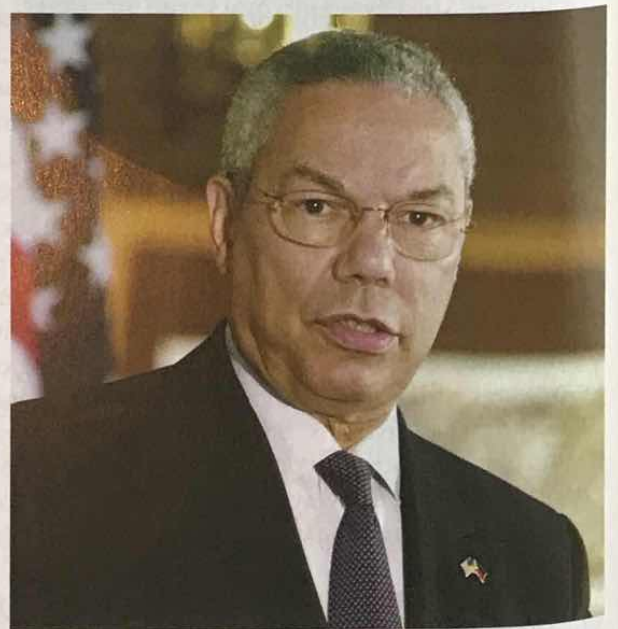


\*Colin Powell illustrates the circularity of these components. Powell's power as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff led to prestige. Powell's prestige, in turn, led to power when he was called from retirement to serve as Secretary of State in the George W. Bush administration.

## IN SUM

For Marx, social class was based solely on a person's relationship to the means of production. One is a member of either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Weber argued that social class is a combination of property, prestige, and power.

The text describes the many relationships among Weber's three components of social class: property, prestige, and power. Colin Powell is an example of power that was converted into prestige—which was then converted back into power.





# Why Is Social Stratification Universal?

**W**hat is it about social life that makes all societies stratified? We shall first consider the explanation proposed by functionalists, which has aroused much controversy in sociology, and then explanations proposed by conflict theorists.

## The Functionalist View: Motivating Qualified People

Functionalists take the position that the patterns of behavior that characterize a society exist because they are functional for that society. Because social inequality is universal, inequality must help societies survive. But how?

**Davis and Moore's Explanation** Two functionalists, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945, 1953), wrestled with this question. They concluded that stratification of society is inevitable because:

1. Society must make certain that its positions are filled.
2. Some positions are more important than others.
3. The more important positions must be filled by the more qualified people.
4. To motivate the more qualified people to fill these positions, society must offer them greater rewards.

Let's look at two examples to flesh out this functionalist argument. The position of college president is more important than that of a student because the president's decisions affect many more people. Any mistakes he or she makes carry implications for a large number of people, including many students. The same is true for an army general compared with a private. The decisions of a general affect careers and paychecks, and may even determine life and death.

Positions with greater responsibility also require greater accountability. College presidents and army generals are accountable for their performance—to boards of trustees and to the leader of a country, respectively. How can society motivate highly qualified people to enter its higher-pressure positions? What keeps people from avoiding them and seeking only less demanding jobs?

The answer, said Davis and Moore, is that society offers greater rewards for its more demanding and accountable positions. If these jobs didn't offer greater prestige, salaries, and benefits, why would anyone strive for them? Thus, a salary of \$2 million, a country club membership, a private jet, and a chauffeured limousine may be necessary in order to get the most highly qualified people to compete with one another for some positions, while a \$30,000 salary without fringe benefits is enough to get hundreds of less qualified people to compete for less demanding positions. It is the same with positions that require rigorous training. If you can get the same pay with a high school diploma, why suffer through the many tests and term papers that college requires?

The functionalist argument is simple and clear. Society works better if its most qualified people hold its most important positions. For example, to get highly talented people to become surgeons—to undergo many years of rigorous training and then cope with life-and-death situations on a daily basis, as well as withstand the Sword of Damocles known as malpractice suits—society must provide a high payoff.

**Tumin's Critique of Davis and Moore** Davis and Moore tried to explain *why* social stratification is universal, not justify social inequality. Nevertheless, their view makes many sociologists uncomfortable, for they see it as coming close to justifying the inequalities in society.

Melvin Tumin (1953) was the first sociologist to point out what he saw as major flaws in the functionalist position. Here are three of his arguments.



*First*, the functionalists say that the most important positions get the higher rewards. But how do we know that the positions with the highest rewards are the most important? Surgeons, for example, receive much higher incomes than garbage collectors, but this doesn't mean that garbage collectors are less important to society—since they help to prevent contagious diseases. We need independent ways to measure importance, and we don't have them.

*Second*, if stratification worked as Davis and Moore described it, society would be a **meritocracy**; that is, all positions would be awarded on the basis of merit. But what do we really have? Instead of ability being the best predictor of who goes to college, for example, the best predictor is income: The more a family earns, the more likely their children are to go to college. This isn't merit, but, rather, inequality built into society. Then there are those who inherit wealth and the opportunities that go with it—also a far cry from merit. Finally, consider gender. A stratification system that places most men above most women does not live up to the argument that talent and ability are the bases for holding important positions. In short, people hold positions in society for many reasons other than merit.

*Third*, if social stratification is so functional, it ought to benefit almost everyone. Yet social stratification is *dysfunctional* for many. Think of the people who could have made valuable contributions to society had they not been born in slums and dropped out of school to take menial jobs to help support the family. Then there are the many who, born female, are assigned “women's work,” thus ensuring that they do not maximize their mental abilities.

## The Conflict Perspective: Class Conflict and Scarce Resources

Conflict theorists don't just criticize details of the functionalist perspective. Rather, they attack its basic premise. Conflict, not function, they stress, is the reason we have social stratification. In every society, groups struggle with one another to gain a larger share of their society's resources. Whenever a group gains power, it uses that power to extract what it can from the groups beneath it. This elite group also uses the social institutions to keep itself in power.

**Mosca's Argument** Italian sociologist Gaetano Mosca argued that every society will be stratified by power. This is inevitable, he said in an 1896 book titled *The Ruling Class*, because:

1. No society can exist unless it is organized. This requires leadership of some sort in order to coordinate people's actions and get society's work done.
2. Leadership (or political organization) means inequalities of power. Some people take leadership positions, while others follow.
3. Human nature is self-centered. Therefore, people in power will use their positions to seize greater rewards for themselves.

There is no way around these facts of life, added Mosca. They make social stratification inevitable, and every society will stratify itself along lines of power.

**Marx's Argument** If he were alive to hear the functionalist argument, Karl Marx would be enraged. From his point of view, the people in power are not there because of superior traits, as the functionalists would have us believe. That view is simply an ideology the elite use to justify their being at the top—and to seduce the oppressed into believing that their welfare depends on keeping society stable. Human history is the history of class struggle, of those in power using society's resources to benefit themselves and to oppress those beneath them—and of oppressed groups trying to overcome their domination.

Marx predicted that the workers would revolt. The day will come, he said, when class consciousness will overcome the ideology that now blinds them. When the workers realize their common oppression, they will rebel against the capitalists. The struggle to con-

**meritocracy** a form of social stratification in which all positions are awarded on the basis of merit



control the means of production may be covert at first, taking the form of work slowdowns or industrial sabotage. Ultimately, however, resistance will break out into the open. The revolution will not be easy, for the bourgeoisie control the police, the military, and even education, where they implant ideas of false class consciousness in the minds of the workers' children.

**Current Applications of Conflict Theory** Just as Marx focused on overarching historic events—the accumulation of capital and power and the struggle between labor and capitalists—some of today's conflict sociologists are doing the same. Their focus is on the current capitalist triumph on a global level (Sklair 2001). They analyze the use of armed forces to keep capitalist nations dominant and the exploitation of workers as capital is moved from the Most Industrialized Nations to the Least Industrialized Nations.

Some conflict sociologists, in contrast, examine conflict wherever it is found, not just as it relates to capitalists and workers. They examine how groups *within the same class* compete with one another for a larger slice of the pie (Schellenberg 1996; Collins 1988, 1999). Even within the same industry, for example, union will fight against union for higher salaries, shorter hours, and more power. A special focus has been conflict between racial-ethnic groups as they compete for education, housing, and even prestige—whatever benefits society has to offer. Another focus has been relations between women and men, which they say is best understood as a conflict over power—the access and control of society's resources. Unlike functionalists, conflict theorists hold that just beneath the surface of what may appear to be a tranquil society lies conflict that is barely held in check.

## Lenski's Synthesis

As you can see, functionalist and conflict theorists disagree sharply. Is it possible to reconcile their views? Sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1966) thought so. He suggested that surplus is the key. He said that the functionalists are right when it comes to groups that don't accumulate a surplus, such as hunting and gathering societies. These societies give a greater share of their resources to those who take on important tasks, such as warriors who risk their lives in battle. It is a different story, said Lenski, when it comes to societies that accumulate surpluses. In them, groups fight over the surplus, and the group that wins becomes an elite. It rules from the top, controlling the groups below it. In the resulting system of social stratification, where you are born in that society, not personal merit, becomes important.

## How Do Elites Maintain Stratification?

**S**uppose that you are part of the ruling elite of your society. What can you do to make sure you don't lose your privileged position? The key lies in controlling ideas and information, and, in the least effective means of all, the use of force.

### Ideology Versus Force

Medieval Europe provides a good example of the power of ideology. In the estate system that we reviewed, land was the primary source of wealth—and only the nobility and the church could own it. Almost everyone was a commoner (or serf) who worked for these powerful landowners. The serfs farmed the land, took care of the livestock, and built the roads and bridges. Each year, they had to turn over a designated portion of their crops to their feudal lord. Year after year, for centuries, they did so. Why?

**Controlling Ideas** Why didn't the serfs rebel and take over the land themselves? There were many reasons, not the least of which was that the nobility and church controlled the army. Coercion, however, only goes so far, for it breeds hostility and nourishes





The divine right of kings was an ideology that made the king God's direct representative on earth—to administer justice and punish evil-doers. This theological-political concept was supported by the Roman Catholic Church, whose representatives crowned the king. Depicted here is Charlemagne, who, crowned by Pope Leo III in 800, established what is known as the Holy Roman Empire. This painting is by Jean Victor Schnetz (1787–1870).

rebellion. How much more effective it is to get the masses to *want* to do what the ruling elite desires. This is where *ideology* (beliefs that justify the way things are) comes into play, and the nobility and clergy used it to great effect. They developed an ideology known as the **divine right of kings**—the idea that the king's authority comes directly from God. The king delegates authority to nobles, who as God's representatives must be obeyed. To disobey is a sin against God; to rebel means physical punishment on earth and eternal suffering in hell.

Controlling people's ideas can be remarkably more effective than using brute force. Although this particular ideology governs few peoples' minds today, the elite in every society develops ideologies to justify its position at the top. For example, around the world schools teach that their country's form of government—*no matter what form of government it is*—is the best. Religious leaders teach that we owe obedience to authority, that laws are to be obeyed. To the degree that their ideologies are accepted by the masses, the elite remains securely in power.

### Controlling Information and Using Technology

To maintain their positions of power, elites also try to control information. In dictatorships, this is accomplished through the threat of force. To muffle criticism, dictators control the press, and they imprison, torture, and kill reporters who dare to publish articles critical of their regime

(Timerman 1981). Lacking such power, the ruling elites of democracies manipulate the media by selectively releasing information—and by withholding information “in the interest of national security.”

The new technology is another tool for the elite. Telephones can be turned into microphones even when they are off the hook. Machines can read the entire contents of a computer in a second, without leaving a trace. Security cameras—“Little Brothers”—have sprouted almost everywhere. Face-recognition systems can scan a crowd of thousands, instantly matching the scans with digitized files of individuals. With these devices, the elite can monitor citizens' activities without anyone knowing that they are being observed. Dictatorships have few checks on how they employ such technology, but in democracies, checks and balances, such as asserting constitutional rights and requiring court orders for search and seizure, at least partially curb their abuse.

The new technology is a two-edged sword. Just as it gives the elite powerful tools for monitoring citizens, it also makes it more difficult for them to control information. The new technology of satellite communications, e-mail, and the Internet pays no respect to international borders. Whether government officials like it or not, on the Internet information flies around the globe in seconds. Internet users also have free access to PGP (Pretty Good Privacy), a code that no government has been able to break.

## IN SUM

To maintain stratification within a society, the elite tries to dominate its society's institutions. In a dictatorship, the elite makes the laws. In a democracy, the elite influences the laws. In both, the legal establishment enforces the laws. The elite also controls the police and military and can give orders to crush a rebellion—or to run the post office or air traffic control if workers strike. Force has its limits, and a nation's elite generally finds it preferable to maintain its stratification system by peaceful means, especially by influencing the thinking of its people.

**divine right of kings** the idea that the king's authority comes directly from God



# Comparative Social Stratification

**N**ow that we have examined systems of social stratification, considered why stratification is universal, and looked at how elites keep themselves in power, let's compare social stratification in Great Britain and in the former Soviet Union. In the next chapter, we'll look at social stratification in the United States.

## Social Stratification in Great Britain

Great Britain is often called England by Americans, but England is only one of the countries that make up the island of Great Britain. The others are Scotland and Wales. In addition, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Like other industrialized countries, Great Britain has a class system that can be divided into a lower, middle, and upper class. Great Britain's population is about evenly divided between the middle class and the lower (or working) class. A tiny upper class, perhaps 1 percent of the population, is wealthy, powerful, and highly educated.

Compared with Americans, the British are very class conscious. Like Americans, they recognize class distinctions on the basis of the type of car a person drives, or the stores someone patronizes. But the most striking characteristics of the British class system are language and education. This shows up in distinctive speech, which has a powerful impact on British life. Accent almost always betrays class. As soon as someone speaks, the listener is aware of that person's class—and treats him or her accordingly (Sullivan 1998).

Education is the primary way by which the British perpetuate their class system from one generation to the next. Almost all children go to neighborhood schools. Great Britain's richest 5 percent, however—who own half the nation's wealth—send their children to exclusive private boarding schools (contrastively known as “public” schools). There they are trained in subjects considered “proper” for members of the ruling class. An astounding 50 percent of the students at Oxford and Cambridge, the country's most prestigious universities, come from this 5 percent of the population. To illustrate how powerfully this system of stratified education affects the national life of Great Britain, sociologist Ian Robertson (1987) said,

[E]ighteen former pupils of the most exclusive of them, Eton, have become prime minister. Imagine the chances of a single American high school producing eighteen presidents!

## Social Stratification in the Former Soviet Union

Heeding Karl Marx's call for a classless society, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924) and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) led a revolution in Russia. They, and the nations that followed their banner, never claimed to have achieved the ideal of communism, in which all contribute their labor to the common good and receive according to their needs. Instead, they used the term *socialism* to describe the intermediate step between capitalism and communism, in which social classes are abolished but some inequality remains.

To tweak the nose of Uncle Sam, the socialist countries would trumpet their equality and point a finger at glaring inequalities in the United States. They, too, however, were marked by huge disparities in privilege. Their major basis of stratification was membership in the Communist Party. This often decided who would gain admission to the better schools or obtain the more desirable jobs. The equally qualified son or daughter of a nonmember would be turned down, for such privileges came with demonstrated loyalty to the Party.

Even the Communist Party was highly stratified. Most members occupied a low level, where they fulfilled such tasks as spying on other workers. For this, they might get easier jobs in the factory or occasional access to special stores to purchase hard-to-find goods. The middle level consisted of bureaucrats who were given better than average access to resources and privileges. At the top level was a small elite: party members who enjoyed not only power but also limousines, imported delicacies, vacation homes, and even servants



Russia's reluctant embrace of capitalism has brought many changes. One is a new affluence—which is matched by a new poverty. Both are evident in this photo from Moscow.



and hunting lodges. As with other stratification systems around the world, women held lower positions in the Party. This was evident at each year's May Day celebration when the top members of the Party reviewed the latest weapons paraded in Moscow's Red Square. Photos of these events showed only men.

The leaders of the USSR became frustrated as they saw the West thrive. They struggled with a bloated bureaucracy, the inefficiencies of central planning, workers who did the minimum because they could not be fired, and a military so costly that it spent one of every eight of the nation's rubles (*Statistical Abstract* 1993:1432; table dropped in later editions). Their ideology did not call for their citizens to be deprived, and in an attempt to turn things around, the Soviet leadership initiated reforms. They allowed elections to be held in which more than one candidate ran for an office. (Prior to this, voters had a choice of only one candidate per office.) They also sold huge chunks of state-owned businesses to the public. Overnight, making investments to try to turn a profit changed from being a crime into a respectable goal.

Russia's transition to capitalism took a bizarre twist. As authority broke down, a powerful Mafia emerged. These criminal groups are headed by gangsters, corrupt government officials, and crooked businessmen. In some towns, they buy the entire judicial system—the police force, prosecutors, and judges (Tavernise 2002). They assassinate business leaders, reporters, and politicians who refuse to cooperate (Zarakhovich 2001; Wines 2002). They are amassing wealth and stashing it in offshore retreats, especially in such watering and wintering spots as Marbella on Spain's Costa del Sol.

Russia's "wild west" days are bound to disappear as the central government reestablishes its authority. At that time, this group of organized criminals will take its place as part of Russia's respectable capitalist class.

## Global Stratification: Three Worlds

**A**s noted at the beginning of this chapter, just as the people within a nation are stratified by power, prestige, and property, so are the world's nations. Until recently, a simple model consisting of First, Second, and Third Worlds was used to depict global stratification. *First World* referred to the indus-



trialized capitalist nations, *Second World* to the communist nations, and *Third World* to any nation that did not fit into the first two categories. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989 made these terms outdated. In addition, although *first*, *second*, and *third* did not mean “best,” “better,” and “worst,” they sounded like it. An alternative classification some now use—developed, developing, and undeveloped nations—has the same drawback. By calling ourselves “developed,” it sounds as though we are mature and the “undeveloped” nations are somehow retarded.

Consequently, I have chosen more neutral, descriptive terms: *Most Industrialized*, *Industrializing*, and *Least Industrialized* nations. We can measure industrialization with no judgment implied as to whether a nation’s industrialization represents “development,” ranks it “first,” or is even desirable at all.

The intention is to depict on a global level the three primary dimensions of social stratification: property, power, and prestige. The Most Industrialized Nations have much greater property (wealth), power (they get their way in international relations), and prestige (they are looked up to as world leaders). The three families sketched in the opening vignette illustrate the far-reaching effects of global stratification.

## The Most Industrialized Nations

The Most Industrialized Nations are the United States and Canada in North America; Great Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, and the other industrialized nations of western Europe; Japan in Asia; and Australia and New Zealand in the area of the world known as Oceania. Although there are variations in their economic systems, these nations are capitalistic. As Table 9.2 shows, although these nations have only 16 percent of the world’s people, they have 31 percent of the earth’s land. Their wealth is so enormous that even their poor live better and longer lives than do the average citizens of the Least Industrialized Nations. The Social Map on the next two pages shows the tremendous disparities in income among the world’s nations.

## The Industrializing Nations

The Industrializing Nations include most of the nations of the former Soviet Union and its former satellites in eastern Europe. As Table 9.2 shows, these nations account for 20 percent of the earth’s land and 16 percent of its people.

The dividing points between the three “worlds” are soft, making it difficult to know how to classify some nations. This is especially the case with the Industrializing Nations. Exactly how much industrialization must a nation have to be in this category? Although soft, these categories do pinpoint essential differences among nations. Most people who live in the Industrializing Nations have much lower incomes and standards of living than those who live in the Most Industrialized Nations. Most, however, are better off than those who live in the Least Industrialized Nations. For example, on such measures as access to electricity, indoor plumbing, automobiles, telephones, and even food, citizens of the Industrializing Nations rank lower than those in the Most Industrialized Nations, but higher than those in the Least Industrialized Nations. As you saw in the opening vignette, this principle applies even to life expectancy.

**Table 9.2** Distribution of the World’s Land and Population

	Land	Population
Most Industrialized Nations	31%	16%
Industrializing Nations	20%	16%
Least Industrialized Nations	49%	68%

Sources: Computed from Kurian 1990, 1991, 1992.



The benefits of industrialization are uneven. Large numbers of people in the Industrializing Nations remain illiterate and desperately poor. Conditions can be gruesome, as discussed in the following Thinking Critically section.

## THINKING Critically

### Open Season: Children As Prey

What is childhood like in the Industrializing Nations? The answer depends on who your parents are. If you are the son or daughter of rich parents, childhood can be pleasant—a world filled with luxuries, and even servants. If you are born into poverty, but living in a rural area where there is plenty to eat, life can still be good—although there may be no books, television, and little education. If you live in a slum, however, life can be horrible—worse even than in the slums of the Most Industrialized Nations. Let's take a glance at what is happening to children in the slums of Brazil.

There is not enough food—this you can take for granted—in addition to broken homes, alcoholism, drug abuse, and a lot of crime. From your knowledge of slums in the Most Industrialized Nations, you would expect these things. What you may not expect, however, are the brutal conditions in which Brazilian slum (*favela*) children live.

Sociologist Martha Huggins (1993; 2000) reports that poverty is so deep that children and adults swarm over garbage dumps to try to find enough decaying food to keep them alive. You might also be surprised to discover that in Brazil the owners of some of these dumps hire armed guards to keep the poor out—so they can sell the garbage for pig food. And you might be shocked to learn that the Brazilian police and death squads murder some of the children. Some associations of shop owners

even hire hit men and auction designated victims off to the lowest bidder! The going rate is half a month's salary—figured at the low Brazilian minimum wage.

Life is cheap in the poor nations—but death squads for children? To understand this, we must first note that Brazil has a long history of violence. Brazil also has a high rate of poverty, has only a tiny middle class, and is controlled by a small group of families who, under a veneer of democracy, make the country's major decisions. Hordes of homeless children, with no schools or jobs, roam the streets. To survive, they shine shoes, beg, steal, and deliver drugs. These street children are viewed as dangerous, and as a threat to society.

To "respectable" storekeepers and shoppers, these children are nothing but trouble. They hurt business, for customers feel intimidated when they see a group of begging children clustered in front of stores. With no effective social institutions to care for these children, one solution is to kill them. As Huggins notes, murder sends a clear message—especially if it is accompanied by ritual torture—gouging out the eyes, ripping open the chest, cutting off the genitals, and raping the girls.

Not all life is bad in the Industrializing Nations, but this is about as bad as it gets.

### For Your CONSIDERATION . . .

Do you think there is anything the Most Industrialized Nations can do about this situation? Or is it any of their business? Is it, though unfortunate, just an "internal" affair that is up to the Brazilians to handle as they wish?

## The Least Industrialized Nations

In the Least Industrialized Nations, most people are peasant farmers living on farms or in villages. These nations account for 49 percent of the Earth's land and 68 percent of the world's people.

Poverty plagues the Least Industrialized Nations, as you can see from the photos on the next three pages. On pages 250–251 are photos I took of people who actually *live* in a city dump. Although wealthy nations have their pockets of poverty, *most* people in the Least Industrialized nations live on less than \$1,000 a year, in many cases considerably less. *Most* of them have no running water, indoor plumbing, or access to trained physicians. Because



modern medicine has cut infant mortality but not births, the population of most of these nations is mushrooming. This places even greater burdens on their limited resources, causing them to fall farther behind each year.

## Modifying the Model

This classification of countries into Most Industrialized, Industrializing, and Least Industrialized is helpful in that it pinpoints gross differences among them. But it also presents problems. As mentioned, just how much industrialization does a nation need in order to be classified as Most Industrialized or Industrializing? Also, in Chapter 6 we noted that several nations have become “postindustrial.” Does this new stage require a separate classification? Finally, the oil-rich nations of the Middle East are not industrialized, but by providing the oil and gasoline that fuel the machinery of the Most Industrialized Nations, some have become immensely wealthy. Consequently, to classify them simply as Least Industrialized glosses over significant distinctions, such as their modern hospitals, extensive prenatal care, pure water systems, abundant food and shelter, high literacy, and even computerized banking (see the Social Map on pages 246–247).

Kuwait, on whose formal behalf the United States and other Most Industrialized Nations fought Iraq in the first Gulf War, is an excellent example of the problem. Kuwait is so wealthy that almost none of its citizens works for a living. The government simply pays them a generous annual salary just for being citizens. Migrant workers from the poor nations do most of the onerous chores that daily life requires, while highly skilled workers from the Most Industrialized Nations run the specialized systems that keep Kuwait’s economy going—and, as with the first Gulf War, apparently fight its wars for it as well. Table 9.3 reflects this significant distinction.



Homeless people sleeping on the streets is a common sight in India's cities. I took this photo in Chennai (formerly Madras).

## How Did the World's Nations Become Stratified?

How did the globe become stratified into such distinct worlds? The commonsense answer is that the poorer nations have fewer resources than the richer nations. As with so many commonsense answers, however, this one, too, falls short. Many of the Industrializing and Least Industrialized Nations are rich in natural resources, while one Most Industrialized Nation, Japan, has few. Four theories explain how global stratification came about.

### Colonialism

The first theory, **colonialism**, focuses on how the countries that industrialized first got the jump on the rest of the world. Beginning in Great Britain about 1750, industrialization spread throughout western Europe. Plowing some of their immense profits into powerful armaments and fast ships, these countries invaded weaker nations, making colonies out of them (Harrison 1993). After subduing these weaker nations, the more powerful countries left behind a controlling force in order to exploit the nations’ labor and natural resources. At one point, there was even a free-for-all among the industrialized European

**Table 9.3 An Alternative Model of Global Stratification**

#### Four Worlds of Development

1. Most Industrialized Nations
2. Industrializing Nations
3. Least Industrialized Nations
4. Oil-rich, nonindustrialized nations

**colonialism** the process by which one nation takes over another nation, usually for the purpose of exploiting its labor and natural resources



countries as they rushed to divide up an entire continent. As they sliced Africa into pieces, even tiny Belgium got into the act and acquired the Congo, which was *seventy-five* times larger than itself.

Whereas the more powerful European countries would plant their national flags in a colony and send their representatives to run the government, the United States usually chose to plant corporate flags in a colony and let these corporations dominate the territory's government. Central and South America are prime examples. There were exceptions, such as the conquest of the Philippines, which President McKinley said was "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them" (Krugman 2002). The purpose of colonialism was to establish *economic colonies*—to exploit the nation's people and resources for the benefit of the "mother" country.

Colonialism, then, shaped many of the Least Industrialized Nations. In some instances, the Most Industrialized Nations were so powerful that to divide their spoils, they drew lines across a map, creating new states without regard for tribal or cultural considerations (Kifner 1999). Britain and France did just this in North Africa and parts of the Middle East, which is why the national boundaries of Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other countries are so straight. This legacy of European conquests still erupts into racial-ethnic and tribal violence, because groups with no history of national identity were arbitrarily incorporated into the same political boundaries.

## World System Theory

To explain how global stratification came about, Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1979, 1984, 1990) developed **world system theory**. He analyzed how industrialization led to four groups of nations. Those that industrialized first (Britain, France, Holland, and later Germany) grew rich and powerful. He calls these the *core nations*. The nations around the Mediterranean grew dependent on trade with these core nations, and their economies stagnated. Wallerstein calls this group the *semiperiphery*. The economies of the eastern European countries, which sold cash crops to the core nations, developed even less. This third group is the *periphery*, or fringe nations. A fourth group of nations was left out of the development of capitalism altogether. This *external area* includes most of Africa and Asia. As capitalism expanded, the relationships among these groups of nations changed. Most notably, Asia is no longer left out of capitalism.

The **globalization of capitalism**—the adoption of capitalism around the world—has created extensive ties among the world's countries. Production and trade are now so interconnected that events around the globe affect us all. Sometimes this is immediate, as happens when a revolution interrupts the flow of raw materials, or if terrorists managed to get their hands on nuclear weapons. At other times the effects are like a slow ripple, as when a government's policies impede its ability to compete in world markets. All of today's societies, then, no matter where they are located, are part of a *world system*.

This interconnection is more evident in some instances, especially in the case of Mexico and the United States. The following Thinking Critically section explores implications of Mexico's *maquiladoras*.

**world system theory** economic and political connections that tie the world's countries together

**globalization of capitalism** capitalism (investing to make profits) becoming the globe's dominant economic system

### THINKING Critically

#### When Globalization Comes Home: Maquiladoras South of the Border

When Humberto drives his truck among Ciudad Juarez's shanties—patched together from packing crates, discarded tires, and cardboard—women and children flock around him. Humberto is the water man, and his truckload of water means life.

Two hundred thousand Mexicans are rushing to Juarez each year, fleeing the hopelessness of the rural areas in pursuit of a better life. They didn't have running water or plumbing in the country anyway, and here they have the possibility of a job, a weekly check that will buy food for the kids.

The pay is \$10 a day.

This may not sound like much, but it is more than twice the minimum daily wage in Mexico.

Assembly-for-export plants, known as *maquiladoras*, dot the Mexican border. The North American



## Culture of Poverty

An entirely different explanation of global stratification was proposed by economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1979). Galbraith claimed that the cultures of the Least Industrialized Nations hold them back. Building on the ideas of anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966a, 1966b), Galbraith argued that some nations are crippled by a **culture of poverty**, a way of life that perpetuates poverty from one generation to the next. He explained it this way: Most of the world's poor live in rural areas, where they barely eke out a living from the land. Their marginal life offers little room for error or risk, so they stick closely to tried-and-true, traditional ways. To experiment with new farming techniques could be a disaster, for failure would lead to hunger and death.

Their religion also encourages them to accept their situation, for it teaches fatalism, that an individual's position in life is God's will. In India, the Dalits are taught that they must have done very bad things in a previous life to suffer so. They are supposed to submit to their situation—and in the next life maybe they'll come back in a more desirable state.

## Evaluating the Theories

Most sociologists prefer colonialism and world system theory. To them, an explanation based on a culture of poverty places blame on the victim—the poor nations themselves. It points to characteristics of the poor nations, rather than to international political arrangements that benefit the Most Industrialized Nations at the expense of the poor nations. But even taken together, these theories yield only part of the picture. None of these theories, for example, would have led anyone to expect that after World War II, Japan—which had a religion that stressed fatalism, which had two major cities destroyed by atomic bombs, and which had been stripped of its colonies—would become an economic powerhouse.

Each theory, then, yields but a partial explanation, and the grand theorist who will put the many pieces of this puzzle together has yet to appear.

## Maintaining Global Stratification

**R**egardless of how the world's nations became stratified, why do the same countries remain rich year after year, while the rest stay poor? Let's look at two explanations of how global stratification is maintained.

### Neocolonialism

Sociologist Michael Harrington (1977) argued that colonialism fell out of style and was replaced by **neocolonialism**. When World War II changed public sentiment about sending soldiers and colonists to weaker countries, the Most Industrialized Nations turned to the international markets as a way to control the Least Industrialized Nations. These powerful nations determine how much they will pay for tin from Bolivia, copper from Peru, coffee from Brazil, and so forth. They also move hazardous industries into the Least Industrialized Nations.

As many of us to our sorrow learn, owing a large debt and falling behind on payments puts us at the mercy of our creditors. So it is with neocolonialism. The *policy* of selling weapons and other manufactured goods to the Least Industrialized Nations on credit turns those countries into eternal debtors. The capital they need to develop their own industries goes instead to the debt, which becomes bloated with mounting interest. Keeping these nations in debt makes them submit to trading terms dictated by the neocolonialists (Carrington 1993; S. Smith 2001).

The oil-rich Middle Eastern nations are a special case of neocolonialism. Because of significant events that recur in this area of the world—such as the two Gulf Wars and the terrorism that originates from this region—it is worth considering Saudi Arabia (*Strategic Energy Policy* 2001; Prashad 2002). This nation was founded under Great Britain's direction and named after the man (Ibn Saud) that Great Britain picked to lead it. To keep

**culture of poverty** the assumption that the values and behaviors of the poor make them fundamentally different from other people, that these factors are largely responsible for their poverty, and that parents perpetuate poverty across generations by passing these characteristics to their children

**neocolonialism** the economic and political dominance of the Least Industrialized Nations by the Most Industrialized Nations



their factories running at a profit, the Most Industrialized Nations need low-priced oil. The Saudi's provide it. If other nations pump less—no matter the cause, whether revolution or a lowering of production in order to raise prices—the Saudis make up the shortfall. In return for stable oil prices, the United States supports the Saudi royal family, overlooks human rights violations, and, not insignificantly, furnishes the latest weapons.

## Multinational Corporations

**Multinational corporations**, companies that operate across many national boundaries, also help to maintain the global dominance of the Most Industrialized Nations. In some cases, multinational corporations exploit the Least Industrialized Nations directly. A prime example is the United Fruit Company. For decades, this company controlled national and local politics in Central America. It ran these nations as fiefdoms for the company's own profit while the U.S. Marines waited in the wings in case the company's interests needed to be backed up.

Most commonly, however, multinational corporations help to maintain international stratification simply by doing business. A single multinational may manage mining operations in several countries, do manufacturing in many others, and run transportation and marketing networks around the globe. No matter where the profits are made, or where they are reinvested, the primary beneficiaries are the Most Industrialized Nations, especially the one in which the multinational corporation has its world headquarters. As Michael Harrington (1977) stressed, the real profits are made in processing the products and in controlling their distribution—and these profits are withheld from the Least Industrialized Nations. For more on multinational corporations, see pages 401–406.

Multinational corporations try to work closely with the elites of the Least Industrialized Nations (Sklair 2001; Wayne 2003). These elites, which live a sophisticated upper-class life in the major cities of their home country, send their children to prestigious universities, such as Oxford, the Sorbonne, and Harvard. The multinational corporations funnel investments to these small circles of power, whose members favor projects such as building laboratories and computer centers in the capital city, projects that do not help the vast majority of their people, who live in poor, remote villages where they eke out meager livings on small plots of land.

The end result is an informal partnership between multinational corporations and the elites of the Least Industrialized Nations. To gain access to the country's raw materials, labor, and market, the corporations pay off the elites. (These are politely called “subsidies” and “offsets,” not bribes.) The elites use their payoffs not only to maintain their genteel lifestyle, but also to purchase advanced weapons from multinational corporations, which they use to oppress their people and preserve their dominance. Both elites and corporations benefit from political stability, which is necessary for keeping their diabolical partnership alive.

This, however, is not the full story. Multinational corporations also play a role in changing international stratification. This is an unintentional by-product of their worldwide search for cheap resources and labor. By moving manufacturing from the Most Industrialized Nations to the Least Industrialized Nations, they not only exploit cheap labor but also bring jobs and money to these nations. Although workers in the Least Industrialized Nations are paid a pittance, it is more than they can earn elsewhere. With new factories come opportunities to develop skills and a capital base.

This does not occur in all nations, but the Pacific Rim nations, nicknamed the “Asian tigers,” are a remarkable case in point. They have developed such a strong capital base that they have begun to rival the older capitalist nations. As has become painfully apparent, these countries also are subject to capitalism's infamous “boom and bust” cycles. Many workers in the *maquiladoras* that you just read about will have their dreams smashed as capitalism moves into its next downturn.

## Technology and Global Domination


The race between the Most and Least Industrialized Nations to develop and apply the new technologies is like a race between a marathon runner and a one-legged man. Can

**multinational corporations** companies that operate across national boundaries; also called *transnational corporations*



the outcome be in doubt? The vast profits piled up by the multinational corporations allow the Most Industrialized Nations to invest huge sums in the latest technology. Gillette, for example, spent \$100 million simply so it could adjust its production “on an hourly basis” (Zachary 1995). These millions came from just one U.S. company. Many Least Industrialized Nations would love to have \$100 million to invest in their entire economy, much less to use for fine-tuning the production of razor blades. In short, in the quest to maintain global domination, the new technologies pile up even more advantages for the Most Industrialized Nations.

## A Concluding Note



et's return to the three families in our opening vignette. Remember that these families represent distinct worlds of money and power, that is, global stratification. Their life chances—from access to material possessions to the opportunity for education and even the likely age at which they will die—are profoundly affected by the global stratification we've looked at. This division of the globe into interconnected units of nations with more or less wealth and more or less power and prestige, then, is much more than a matter of theoretical interest. In fact, it is *your* life we are talking about.