Social Class in America

All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-borne, the other the mass of the people. . . . The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. . . . Give, therefore, to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second, and as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they therefore will ever maintain good government.

Alexander Hamilton (1780)
On the night the Titanic sank on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic in 1912, social class proved to be a key determinant of who survived and who perished. Among those who lost their lives were 40% of the first-class passengers, 58% of the second-class passengers, and 75% of the third-class passengers. The class differences were even starker for women and children (who were given priority access to the lifeboats): just 7% of first-class, but over half of third-class passengers, went down with the Titanic (Lord 1955).

The divergent fates of the Titanic’s passengers present a dramatic illustration of the connection between social class and what pioneer sociologist Max Weber called life chances. Weber invented the term to emphasize the extent to which our chances for the good things in life are shaped by class position.

Contemporary sociology has followed Weber’s lead and found that the influence of social class on our lives is indeed pervasive. Table 1.1 gives a few examples. These statistics compare people at the bottom, middle, and top of the class structure. They show, among other things, that people in the bottom 25% are less likely to be in good health, more likely to find life boring, less likely to have Internet access, and more likely to be the victims of violent crime. Those in the top 25% are healthier, safer, more likely to send their kids to college, and more optimistic about the future. It is no wonder that they are, on average, happier with their lives.

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Table 1.1 Life Chances by Social Class a

a. Classes defined by income: bottom 25%, middle 50%, and top 25%.
Thoughtful observers have recognized the importance of social classes since the beginnings of Western philosophy. They knew that some individuals and families had more money, more influence, or more prestige than their neighbors. The philosophers also realized that the differences were more than personal or even familial, for the pattern of inequalities tended to congeal into strata of families who shared similar positions. These social strata or classes divided society into a hierarchy; each stratum had interests or goals in common with equals but different from, and often conflicting with, those of groups above or below them. Finally, it was noted that political action often flows from class interests. As one of the founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, observed, the rich seek social stability to preserve their advantages, but the poor work for social change that would bring them a larger share of the world’s rewards.

This book is an analysis of the American class system. We explore class differences in income, prestige, power, and other key variables. We will point out how these variables react on one another—for instance, how a person’s income affects beliefs about social policy or how one’s job affects the choice of friends or spouse. And we will explore the question of movement from one class to another, recognizing that a society can have classes and still permit individuals to rise or fall among them.

We begin by consulting two major theorists of social stratification, Karl Marx and Max Weber, to identify the major facets of the subject. Marx (1818–1883) and Weber (1864–1920) established an intellectual framework that strongly influenced subsequent scholars. (Social stratification, by the way, refers to social ranking based on characteristics such as wealth, occupation, or prestige.)

Karl Marx

Although the discussion of stratification goes back to ancient philosophy, modern attempts to formulate a systematic theory of class differences began with Marx’s work in the 19th century. Most subsequent theorizing has represented an attempt either to reformulate or to refute his ideas. Marx, who was born in the wake of the French Revolution and lived in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, emphasized the study of social class as the key to an understanding of the turbulent events of his time. His studies of economics, history, and philosophy convinced him that societies are mainly shaped by their economic organization and that social classes form the link between economic facts and social facts. He also concluded that fundamental social change is the product of conflict between classes. Thus, in Marx’s view, an understanding of classes is basic to comprehending how societies function and how they are transformed.

In Marx’s work, social classes are defined by their distinctive relationships to the means of production. Taking this approach, Marx defined two classes in the emerging industrial societies of his own time: the capitalist class (or bourgeoisie) and the working class (or proletariat). He describes the bourgeoisie as the class that owns the means of production, such as mines or factories, and the proletariat as the class of those who must sell their labor to the owners of the means to earn a wage and
stay alive. Marx maintained that in modern, capitalist society, each of these two
basic classes tends toward an internal homogeneity that obliterates differences
within them. Little businesses lose out in competition with big businesses, concen-
trating ownership in a small bourgeoisie of monopoly capitalists. In a parallel fash-
ion, gradations within the proletariat fade in significance as machines get more
sophisticated and do the work that used to be done by skilled workers. As the basic
classes become internally homogenized, the middle of the class structure thins out
and the system as a whole becomes polarized between the two class extremes.

But notice that these broad generalizations refer to long-range trends. Marx rec-
ognized that at any given historical moment, the reality of the class system was
more complex. The simplifying processes of homogenization and polarization were
tendencies, unfolding over many decades, which might never be fully realized.
Marx’s descriptions of contemporary situations in his writings as a journalist and
pamphleteer show more complexity in economic and political groupings than do
his writings as a theorist of long-term historical development.

We have noted that Marx defined the proletariat, bourgeoisie, and other classes
by their relationship to the means of production. Why? In the most general sense,
because he regarded production as the center of social life. He reasoned that people
must produce to survive, and they must cooperate to produce. The individual’s
place in society, relationships to others, and outlook on life are shaped by his or her
work experience. More specifically, those who occupy a similar role in production
are likely to share economic and political interests that bring them into conflict
with other participants in production. Capitalists, for instance, reap profit (in
Marx’s terms, expropriate surplus) by paying their workers less than the value of
what they produce. Therefore, capitalists share an interest in holding down wages
and resisting legislation that would enhance the power of unions to press their
demands on employers.

From a Marxist perspective, the manner in which production takes place (that
is, the application of technology to nature) and the class and property relationships
that develop in the course of production are the most fundamental aspects of any
society. Together, they constitute what Marx called the mode of production. Societies
with similar modes of production ought to be similar in other significant respects
and should therefore be studied together. Marx’s analysis of European history after
the fall of Rome distinguished three modes of production, which he saw as succes-

sive stages of societal development: feudalism, the locally based agrarian society of
the Middle Ages, in which a small landowning aristocracy in each district exploited
the labor of a peasant majority; capitalism, the emerging industrial and commercial
order of Marx’s own lifetime, already international in scope and characterized by
the dominance of the owners of industry over the mass of industrial workers; and
communism, the technologically advanced, classless society of the future, in which
all productive property would be held in common.

Marx regarded the mode of production as the main determinant of a society’s
superstructure of social and political institutions and ideas. He used the concept of
superstructure to answer an old question: How do privileged minorities maintain
their positions and contain the potential resistance of exploited majorities? His
reply was that the class that controls the means of production typically controls the
means of compulsion and persuasion—the superstructure. He observed that in feudal times, the landowners monopolized military and political power. With the rise of modern capitalism, the bourgeoisie gained control of political institutions. In each case, the privileged class could use the power of the state to protect its own interests. For instance, in Marx's own time, the judicial, legislative, and police authority of European governments dominated by the bourgeoisie were employed to crush the early labor movement, a pattern that was repeated a little later in the United States. In an insightful overstatement from the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx asserted, "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx 1979:475).

But Marx did not believe that class systems rested on pure compulsion. He allowed for the persuasive influence of ideas. Here Marx made one of his most significant contributions to social science: the concept of ideology. He used the term to describe the pervasive ideas that uphold the status quo and sustain the ruling class. Marx noted that human consciousness is a social product. It develops through our experience of cooperating with others to produce and to sustain social life. But social experience is not homogeneous, especially in a society that is divided into classes. The peasant does not have the same experience as the landlord and therefore develops a distinct outlook. One important feature of this differentiation of class outlooks is the tendency for members of each group to regard their own particular class interests as the true interests of the whole society. What makes this significant is that one class has superior capacity to impose its self-serving ideas on other classes.

The class that dominates production, Marx argued, also controls the institutions that produce and disseminate ideas, such as schools, mass media, churches, and courts. As a result, the viewpoint of the dominant class pervades thinking in areas as diverse as the laws of family life and property, theories of political democracy, notions of economic rationality, and even conceptions of the afterlife. In Marx's (1979) words, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (p. 172). In extreme situations, ideology can convince slaves that they ought to be obedient to their masters, or poor workers that their true reward will eventually come to them in heaven.

Marx (1979) maintained, then, that the ruling class had powerful political and ideological means to support the established order. Nonetheless, he regarded class societies as intrinsically unstable. In a famous passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, he observed,

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome, we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the
Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: It has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (pp. 473–474)

As these lines suggest, Marx saw class struggle as the basic source of social change. He coupled class conflict to economic change, arguing that the development of new means of production (for example, the development of modern industry) implied the emergence of new classes and class relationships. The most serious political conflicts develop when the interests of a rising class are opposed to those of an established ruling class. Class struggles of this sort can produce a "revolutionary reconstitution of society." Notice that each epoch creates within itself the growth of a new class that eventually seizes power and inaugurates a new epoch.

Two eras of transformation through class conflict held particular fascination for Marx. One was the transition from feudalism to modern capitalism in Europe, a process in which he assigned the bourgeoisie (the urban capitalist class) "a most revolutionary part" (Marx 1979:475). Into a previously stable agrarian society, the bourgeoisie introduced a stream of technological innovations, an accelerating expansion of production and trade, and radically new forms of labor relations. The feudal landlords, feeling their own interests threatened, resisted change. The result was a series of political conflicts (the French Revolution was the most dramatic instance) through which the European bourgeoisie wrested political power from the landed aristocracy.

Marx believed that a second, analogous era of transformation was beginning during his own lifetime. The capitalist mode of production had created a new social class, the urban working class, or proletariat, with interests directly opposed to those of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie. This conflict of interests arose, not simply from the struggle over wages between capital and labor, but from the essential character of capitalist production and society. The capitalist economy was inherently unstable and subject to periodic depressions with massive unemployment. These economic crises heightened awareness of long-term trends widening the gap between rich and poor. Furthermore, capitalism’s blind dependence on market mechanisms built on individual greed created an alienated existence for most members of society. Marx was convinced that only under communism, with the means of production communally controlled, could these conditions be overcome.

The situation of the proletarian majority made it capitalism’s most deprived and alienated victim and therefore the potential spearhead of a communist revolution. However, in Marx’s view, an objective situation of class oppression does not lead directly to political revolt. For that to happen, the oppressed class must first develop class consciousness—that is, a sense of shared identity and common grievances, requiring a collective response. Some of Marx’s most fruitful sociological work, to which we will return in Chapter 9, is devoted to precisely this problem. What intrinsic tendencies of capitalist society, Marx asked, are most likely to produce a class-conscious proletariat? Among the factors he isolated were the stark simplification
of the class order in the course of capitalist development; the concentration of large masses of workers in the new industrial towns; the deprivations of working-class people, exacerbated by the inherent instability of the capitalist economy; and the political sophistication gained by the proletariat through participation in working-class organizations such as labor unions and mass political parties.

What, in sum, can be said of Marx’s contribution to stratification theory? His recognition of the economic basis of class systems was a crucial insight. His theory of ideology and his conception of the connection between social classes and political processes, although oversimple as stated, proved a fruitful starting point for modern research. As for his conception of change, a series of 20th-century revolutions—including those in Mexico (1910), Russia (1917), and China (1949)—have established the significance of class conflict for radical social transformation. However, social revolutions have typically occurred in peasant societies during early stages of industrialization under foreign influence rather than in the advanced industrial countries where Marx anticipated them. In the advanced industrial countries, the proletariat used labor unions and mass political parties to defend its interests, thus rechanneling the forces of class conflict into the legal procedures of democratic politics.

A century after his death, it is apparent that Marx was a better sociologist than he was a prophet. He identified many of the central processes of capitalist society, but he was unable to foresee all the consequences of their unfolding, and his vision of a humane socialist future has not been realized in any communist country.

Max Weber

The great German sociologist Max Weber, who wrote in the early years of the 20th century, was interested in many of the same problems that had fascinated Marx—among them, the origins of capitalism, the role of ideology, and the relationship between social structure and economic processes. Weber frequently benefited from Marx’s work, even while reaching rather different conclusions. In the field of stratification, his special contributions were (1) to introduce a conceptual clarity that was often lacking in Marx’s references to social classes and (2) to highlight the subjective aspects of stratification, as expressed in everyday interactions.

Weber made a crucial distinction between two orders of ranking or stratification: class and status. Class had roughly the same meaning for both Weber and Marx. It refers to groupings of people according to their economic position. Class situation or membership, according to Weber, is defined by the individual’s strength in economic markets (for example, the job market or capital markets), to the extent that these determine individual life chances. By life chances, he meant the fundamental aspects of an individual’s future possibilities that are shaped by class membership, from the infant’s chances for decent nutrition to the adult’s opportunities for worldly success.

Following Marx, Weber stressed that the most important class distinction is between those who own property (land, small businesses, corporate stock, etc.) and those who do not. However, he noted that many significant distinctions can be
made within each of these categories. Among the propertied elite, for example, there are rentiers, who support themselves with income from stocks, bonds, and other securities, and entrepreneurs, who depend on profits from businesses they own and operate. The propertyless can be differentiated by the occupational skills that they bring to the marketplace: The life chances of an unskilled worker are vastly different from those of a well-trained engineer. This suggests that the vast population of wage earners whom Marx lumped into the proletariat were really a highly differentiated group.

For Weber, a social class, then, becomes a group of people who share the same economically shaped life chances. Notice that this way of defining a class does not imply that the individuals in it are necessarily aware of their common situation. It simply establishes a statistical category of people who are, from the point of view of the market (and the sociologist), similar to each other. Only under certain circumstances do they become aware of their common fate, begin to think of each other as equals, and develop institutions of joint action to further their shared interests.

Status, the second major order of stratification defined by Weber, is ranking by social prestige. In contrast with class, which is based on objective economic fact, status is a subjective phenomenon, a sentiment in people’s minds. Although the members of a class may have little sense of shared identity, the members of a status group generally think of themselves as a social community, with a common lifestyle (a familiar term we owe to Weber). In a classic essay on stratification, Weber (1946) outlined these distinctions:

In contrast to the purely economically determined “class situation,” we wish to designate as “status situation” every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor. . . .

Status groups are normally communities. They are, however, often of an amorphous kind. . . . In content, status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle. Linked with this expectation are restrictions on “social” intercourse (that is, intercourse which is not subservient to economic or any other of business’s “functional” purposes). These restrictions may confine normal marriages to within the status circle and may lead to complete endogamous closure. . . .

Of course, material monopolies provide the most effective motives for the exclusiveness of a status group. . . . With an increased inclosure of the status group, the conventional preferential opportunities for special employment grow into a legal monopoly of special offices for the members. . . .

With some over-simplification, one might thus say that “classes” are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas “status groups” are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special “styles of life.” (pp. 186–193)

In those passages, Weber specified many of the interrelations between class and status, between economy and society. Because of class position, a person earns a
certain income. That income permits a certain lifestyle, and people soon make friends with others who live the same way. As they interact with one another, they begin to conceive of themselves as a special type of people. They restrict interaction with outsiders who seem too different (they may be too poor, too uneducated, too clumsy to live graciously enough for acceptance as worthy companions). Marriage partners are chosen from similar groups because once people follow a certain style of life, they find it difficult to be comfortable with people who live differently. Thus, the status group becomes an ingrown circle. It earns a position in the local community that entitles its members to social honor or prestige from inferiors.

Status groups develop the conventions or customs of a community. Through time, they evolve appropriate ways of dressing, of eating, and of living that are somewhat different from the ways of other groups. These ways are expressed as moral judgments reflecting abstract principles of value that separate “good” from “bad.” The application of these principles to individuals establishes rankings of social honor or prestige. These distinctions often react back on the marketplace; to preserve their advantages, high-status groups attempt to monopolize those goods that symbolize their style of life—they pass consumption laws prohibiting the lower orders from wearing lace, or they band together to keep Jews or blacks out of prestigious country clubs. (Weber regarded invidious distinctions among ethnic groups as a type of status stratification.)

A status order tends to restrict the freedom of the market, not only by its monopolization of certain types of consumption goods, but also by its monopolization of the opportunities to earn money. If they can get the power, status groups often restrict entry into the more lucrative professions or trades and access to credit. For example, entry into the electricians’ union might be restricted to sons of current members. The local bank might be more willing to grant a loan to a member of the country club than to a social nobody. More generally, birth into a high-status family gives children advantages of social grace and personal contacts that eventually help their careers.

Weber observed that, in theory, class and status are opposed principles. In its purest form, the class or economic order is universalistic and impersonal; it recognizes no social distinctions and judges solely on the basis of competitive skill or accumulated wealth. Status, in contrast, is based on particularistic distinctions: some people are “better” than others. Status groups want to restrict freedom of competition in both production and consumption.

Weber recognized that, in practice, class and status are intertwined—at least in the long run. Historically, the status order is created by the class order; consumption, after all, is based on production. For example, although elite society might react against the status claims of the newly rich, it typically accepts their descendants if they have properly cultivated the conventions of the higher status group. On another level, the appearance of classes based on new sources of wealth—for instance, the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie in Europe and America in the 19th century—signals a future restructuring of the status order as a whole.

Weber, like Marx, was interested in the relationship between stratification and political power. It would be accurate to say that for both men, stratification was essentially a political topic. But Weber was highly skeptical of the implication in
Marx's work that all political phenomena could be traced back directly to class. For instance, Weber suggested that the institutions of the modern bureaucratic state exercise an influence on society that is not reducible to the control exercised by a single class. (In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx [1979:594–617] himself reluctantly adopted this view for a special circumstance, but not Weber’s corollary that a communist state might be grimly similar to a capitalist state, reflecting bureaucratic domination of society.)

Weber opposed what he called the “pseudo-scientific operation” of Marxist writers of his day, who assumed an automatic link between class position and class consciousness (Weber 1946:184). He noted that a shared economic situation can and sometimes does lead to an awareness of shared class interests and a willingness to engage in militant class action, but it need not. Indeed, the very notion of class interest was highly ambiguous for Weber. In his view, there are multiple classes in modern societies and they are continually changing. Under such conditions, individuals may think of their own identities, and shared or conflicting interests with others, in varied ways. Someone whom sociologists would identify as working class might think of himself as white and middle class, because he believes he has nothing in common with minority workers and supposes himself to be a middle-income, average American. Or, he might strongly identify with other workers, whatever their race, and become class conscious in the Marxian sense. Neither would surprise Weber.

Implicit in Weber’s approach to stratification is the idea that status considerations can undermine the development of class consciousness and class struggle. For example, the politics of the American South has long been shaped by the tendency of poor whites to identify with richer whites rather than with poor blacks who share their economic position. Weber noted that political parties can develop around class, status, or other bases for conflict over power. The major American political parties are amorphous coalitions that have never been as clearly oriented toward the pursuit of class interests as have, for example, the working-class parties of Western Europe. None of this would have surprised Weber.

In sum, Weber accepted Marx’s idea of the underlying economic basis of stratification. But Weber’s conception of social class was much more flexible than Marx’s and probably better adapted to the complexities of modern societies. Weber also identified another order of stratification, by differentiating between class and status. He argued that the two interact with each other and with the political process in ways not fully recognized by Marx.

Three Issues and Ten Variables

Marx’s and Weber’s writings suggest three broad issues in the study of social class:

1. **Economic basis.** How do class distinctions arise from economic distinctions? And how, in particular, does economic change transform the class system? These were central concerns for both theorists.
2. **Social basis.** How are economic class distinctions reflected in social distinctions and social behavior? Weber’s discussion of status groups is relevant here. He noted their tendency to become social communities with distinctive lifestyles and values. He was intrigued by the complex relationship between class and status.

3. **Political implications.** How does the class system affect the political system? How do economically dominant classes interact politically with the other classes in a society? For both Marx and Weber, class was ultimately a political topic.

These issues led us to organize our examination of the class system around a series of related sociological variables. With regard to the economic issue, we will be looking at occupation, wealth, income, and poverty; with regard to the social issue, at prestige, association, socialization, and social mobility; and with regard to the political issue, at power and class consciousness. (Association refers to the patterned social connections among people and socialization to the process through which the young learn the skills they need to participate in society. These and the other variables are more precisely defined in the appropriate chapters and in the glossary at the end of the book.)

### What Are Social Classes?

We define social classes as *groups of families, more or less equal in rank and differentiated from other families above or below them with regard to characteristics such as occupation, income, wealth, and prestige.*

Our approach raises two questions: Why conceive of stratification in terms of *discrete classes*? And why think of classes as groupings of *families*? The first question arises because it is logically possible for a society to be stratified in a continuous gradation between high and low without any sharp lines of division. In reality, this is unlikely. The sources of a family’s position are shared by many other similar families; there are only a limited number of types of occupations or of possible positions in the property system. One holds a routine position in a service, factory, or office setting; lives by manual skill or professional expertise; or manages people and money. People in similar positions have similar incomes and a tendency to mix with one another, to grow similar in their thinking and lifestyle. The similarities are shared within families and often inherited by children. In other words, the various stratification variables tend to converge and jell; they form a pattern within which social classes begin to form.

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1At times we will use the terms *family* and *household* interchangeably. When discussing income, we will often make the Census Bureau’s more rigorous distinction between a group of related people residing together (family) and the broader concept that encompasses families, individuals residing alone, and unrelated individuals residing together (household).
The pattern formed by the objective connections among the variables is heightened by the way people think about social matters because popular thought tends toward stereotypes. Doctors are viewed as a homogeneous group, and distinctions among them tend to be ignored. Similarly, poor people tend to lump together all bosses, and rich people overlook the many distinctions that exist among those who labor for an hourly wage.

The second question arises because it is logically possible to study stratification of individuals rather than families. Why not define classes as discrete groups of individuals of equal rank? The simple answer, implied earlier, is that the members of a household live under the same roof, pool their resources, share a common economic fate, and tend, for all these reasons, to have a similar perspective on the world. This answer is not quite as persuasive as it was 30 or 40 years ago. What made it seem self-evident in the past was that families were largely dependent on income produced by a “male head of household.” The sociologist could place the family in the class system on the basis of his occupation, which tended to be a good predictor of the family’s economic condition and its political outlook. Women, of course, were largely ignored in this conception of the class order, but it was arguably a reasonable approach to a world in which women’s public economic role was quite circumscribed.

In the last few decades, women’s economic and family roles have changed radically. Single women head a growing proportion of households. Married-couple families increasingly depend on two incomes. Where do we place a family in the class hierarchy if two spouses, both employed in working-class jobs, together produce a comfortable middle-class income? Suppose the husband is a factory worker and the wife is a teacher. Again, where do we place them? And, if occupation is the key to political outlook, whose occupation counts here?

There are no fully satisfactory answers to such questions—the world is a complicated place. But there are, again, tendencies toward convergence and consistency. Family members (whatever disparities exist among them) still depend on common resources. They are viewed by outsiders as sharing the same position within the community. Husbands and wives typically have similar levels of education and, as a result, there is a correlation between the jobs held by working couples. Although married-couple families have grown increasingly dependent on wives’ earnings, husbands are still the most important providers in the great majority of families. In the chapters that follow, we will repeatedly return to these issues, exploring the changing economic role of women in some detail. But we will continue to regard families as the basic unit of stratification analysis and define classes as groups of families or households.

At the same time, we will use the term family in the broadest possible sense to include households consisting of one person and larger domestic units “headed” by single females, single males, or couples (both heterosexual and homosexual). We will generally establish the class position of a family by the occupation of the family member who is the principal income earner. (In some cases, we will use household wealth or dependence on government payments to define class position.)

In sum, we will interpret the stratification system with the 10 variables mentioned earlier and discrete social classes composed of families. But we recognize that households
may have inconsistent scores on the variables (for example, a high-income, low-prestige occupation), that the lines dividing classes may be inconveniently fuzzy, and that the class placement of some families may be ambiguous. The reason for all this incoherence is not so much the inadequacy of the variables or definitions we use as the vague, fluid character of the stratification system itself. This book emphasizes the tendencies toward convergence, toward crystallization of the pattern, despite the many disturbing influences, often the result of social change, that keep the patterns from becoming as clear-cut in reality as in theory.

An American Class Structure

Some readers will have concluded by now that there is as much art as science in the study of social stratification—and they are probably right. We can make factual statements about, say, the distribution of income or patterns of association. But efforts to combine such information into broader statements about the class system run up against the inherent inconsistencies of social reality and are inevitably influenced by the viewpoint of the author.

We will, for example, be examining several general models of the class structure. Each tells us how many classes there are, how they can be distinguished from one another, and who belongs in each class. Some class models are more convincing than others because they make better use of the facts and illuminate matters that concern us. Some are obviously worthless. But there is really no way to distinguish the one “true” model.

Our own model of the American class structure represents a synthesis of what we have learned writing this book. We summarize it here and reconsider it in greater detail in the last chapter. The model, diagrammed in Figure 1.1, stratifies the population into six classes, and one subclass. The diagram shows the occupations and household income levels typical of each class. But our main concern, as we explain below, is not with the level of income but a family’s principal source of income.

Drawing from Marx, we distinguish a very small top class, whose income derives largely from return on assets—the capitalist class. These are people who own lucrative businesses, commercial real estate, and securities such as stocks and bonds. They may hold jobs—some are top corporate executives—but ownership is the key to their high incomes. Drawing from Weber, we recognize multiple class distinctions among the nonpropertied majority below the capitalist class. Most depend, not on income from assets, but income from jobs. We sort them into classes based on the occupation of the principal income earner in each household.

Below the capitalist class is an upper-middle class of well-paid, university-educated managers and professionals: people with responsible positions in business organizations, along with lawyers, doctors, accountants, and other specialists. At the very top of this class, we distinguish a small stratum of very successful professionals, small-business owners, salespeople, and executives with incomes in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. We call this subclass the working rich because their incomes would largely disappear if they stopped working.
Next are the two largest classes, the *middle class* and the *working class*. Among those we place in the middle class are lower-level managers, insurance agents, teachers, nurses, electricians, and plumbers. Our working class includes unskilled factory workers, office workers without specialized training, and many retail sales workers. The boundary between these two classes cannot be sharply drawn. Note that we do not depend on the traditional blue collar–white collar (manual versus nonmanual) distinction; there are blue-collar and white-collar workers in both classes. Instead, we have delineated the two classes based on the levels of skill or knowledge and independence or authority associated with occupations.

At the bottom of the class structure are the *working poor* and the *underclass*. The working poor are employed at very low-skill, low-wage, often insecure jobs.
that do not pay benefits such as medical insurance. Fast-food workers, maids and
janitors, and many unskilled construction workers fall into this class. Because
their jobs are poorly paid, precarious, and devoid of benefits, their lives are
marked by financial instability. Members of the underclass may have some job
income, but they are often dependent on income from government programs,
including Social Security, public assistance, and veterans benefits. A few draw
income from criminal activities.

Note that this model or map of the class system is based entirely on economic
distinctions. We do not incorporate prestige differences (in Weber’s terms, status
distinctions) because we believe they derive, in the long run, from economic dif-
fferences. Our model is built around sources of income: The top class draws
income from capitalist property, the intermediate classes rely on earnings from
jobs at differing occupational levels, and the bottom class depends on a mix of
unstable job income and government payments. The emphasis here is on the
source rather than the level of income. In fact, there is bound to be some overlap
in income level between classes as we have defined them. In the middle of the
model, occupation is the decisive variable, separating those who depend on jobs
into distinct levels.

A final observation: The distinction between middle class and working class—
traditionally portrayed by division between office and factory—was long regarded
as the critical dividing line in the class structure. But today many office jobs are sim-
plified and routinized like jobs in the factory. We believe that the line dividing the
capitalist and upper-middle classes from the classes below them has become the
most important boundary. One reason is that economic returns on capitalist prop-
erty and on the advanced education typical of the upper-middle class have grown
rapidly in recent years, while rewards for lower levels of education or skill have stag-
nated or shrunk.

Is the American Class Structure Changing?

We will return to this question repeatedly as we move from topic to topic. In par-
ticular, we will want to find out how the transformation of the U.S. economy in the
last two or three decades has affected the class structure. In recent years, increasing
class inequality has become a national political issue. Critics argue that the United
States is becoming a less egalitarian, more rigidly stratified society. They say that
poverty is increasing, the middle class is shrinking, social mobility is declining, and
wealth is becoming more concentrated. We examine data on wealth, income, jobs,
mobility, poverty rates, political attitudes, and other factors to see whether the
American class system is changing, and if so, how. Among the questions we ask are
these: Is the gap between rich and the rest of the population growing? Are oppor-
tunities to get ahead better or worse than they were in the past? Are neighborhoods
becoming more segregated by social class? Is the balance of political power between
classes changing?
The charts in Figure 1.2 preview some of our findings. They tell a story of a remarkable turnaround: Class inequalities, which fell in the 1950s and 1960s, rose steeply after the mid-1970s. This reversal is explicit in the U-shaped curves. Individually, the charts in Figure 1.2 tell us the following about the years since the early 1970s: (a) Wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the richest 1% of households; (b) the income gap between the top 5% and the bottom 40% of families is growing; (c) the proportion of men who work full time, year round, but still have poverty-level incomes has been rising; and (d) the country has made no progress against poverty since the early 1970s; but (e) the proportion of families with high incomes (above $100,000) has been growing steadily.

We take a second, more careful look at each of these charts in the appropriate chapters. For now, we want to drive home the lesson of what has been called “the great U-turn” (Harrison and Bluestone 1988) and distinguish two periods in recent history. We will call the years after World War II, from 1946 to approximately 1973, the Age of Shared Prosperity, and the years since 1973, the Age of Growing Inequality.
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Conclusion

We finish most chapters with a summary of the main points and some general conclusions. That’s a little hard to do for this first chapter because it is actually a conceptual summary of the entire book. Much of what we have to say about the American class system and the way we approach the subject are foreshadowed here. Our advice to serious readers is simply to reread this chapter. The effort will be rewarded as you move through the rest of the book.

At the end of each chapter, you will also find a list of the key terms that were used and that are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 255. The list below is especially long because many basic concepts were introduced in this chapter. We revisit all but a few of them in later chapters.

Key Terms Defined in the Glossary

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<td>Age of Shared Prosperity</td>
<td>occupation</td>
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<td>middle class</td>
<td>working poor</td>
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Suggested Readings


*Social class from a feminist perspective.*


*A large collection of articles on important aspects of stratification in various countries. Part I covers basic theory, including Marx, Weber, and Davis and Moore’s functionalist explanation of stratification.*
Chapter 1  Social Class in America  


  Contains short personal and intellectual biographies of Marx and Weber that put them into the context of their times.


  Thoughtful guide to recent controversies.


  Anthology blending classic and postmodern readings.


  Two provocative books, arguing that the concept of social class no longer corresponds to social reality and should be abandoned by students of social inequality.


  Ambitious attempt to explain the development of stratification in each of several evolutionary stages, based on technology.


  Varied approaches to the study of stratification. Available from the ASA, 1722 N Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.


  A selection of Weber’s most important sociological writings (except for his book The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism). Especially relevant are “Class, Status, Party”; “Bureaucracy”; and “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism.”