

# I

## The Evolution of Families and Marriages

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**F**amilies are essentially care institutions that vary across cultures and change over time. Their essential function, historically, has been to contribute to the basic economic survival of family members; thus, the structure of families often adapts to the economy, and cultural ideologies and laws are created to reinforce that adaptation. Over time, societies grow and become more complex and stratified, and the nature and quality of life among families becomes differentiated based on varying economies and the particular position of the family within the economic system. Broadly speaking, social scientists have identified four major economies that have existed across the span of human history: hunting and gathering (or foraging), agrarian/agricultural, modern/industrial, and service/knowledge-based economies. All these economies still exist in various parts of the world, and nations often have mixed economies. Families of some sort existed and continue to exist in all of these economies and, as social institutions, are perhaps as old as humankind. Marriage, on the other hand, is a more recent institution. Because hunting and gathering societies existed for millennia, it is quite likely that some form of marriage, or at least temporary partnering between women and men, emerged in the early versions of these societies. In foraging societies, however, marriage as a stable partnership between men and women probably took a backseat to family ties. Indeed, it was membership in the family that best ensured physical and economic survival.

This chapter has several purposes. The first is to briefly define the family and marriage, discuss their origins, and explain how they evolved in tandem

with economic development. In this book, I foreground economic forces as transforming families and ultimately shaping the nature and quality of family life, as a prelude to chapters that look at families from a social class perspective. However, it is important to keep in mind that, as pointed out above, other social structural forces (e.g., ideologies, politics) also shape families. Thus, there is no rigid, universal, or inevitable link between family structure, economy, and ideology; instead, people are active, cognitive beings who may respond to structural forces in a variety of ways (Jayakody, Thornton, and Axinn 2008). In fact, as social institutions, the family and economy are mutually interactive and influential, so families may also shape aspects of the economy. As historian Tamara Hareven (1991) explains, families are not separate entities but are intricately connected to other social institutions, such as religion and work; thus, they do not merely react to economic and ideological changes, but they can initiate or resist such changes (p. 96). Families may mediate the demands of the economy by deciding which family members will be involved in productive labor or by embracing values that emphasize achievement and success (Furstenberg 1966).

This chapter also explores the early origins of the major types of social inequality discussed in this book—inequalities based on social class, race/ethnicity, and gender. Scholars agree that although some forms of social inequality probably existed in the earliest societies, perhaps based on the differing talents and abilities of people, such inequalities were not particularly rigid or consequential. People in early foraging societies were often nomadic and lacked surplus wealth or even the concept of property ownership, and thus they had little basis for creating a significant stratification system. The emergence of settled societies, however, was marked by the discovery of agriculture and the domestication of animals and fostered the rise of institutionalized inequalities based on social class, ethnicity, race, and gender. These social inequalities reflect differences in economic development, wealth, and power, and, as societies advance, they are rationalized based on religious teachings, ethnocentric attitudes, and cultural ideologies.

The emergence and expansion of capitalist markets in Europe during the 1500s offers one example of the interaction between economic and ideological forces and the impact they can have on notions of family. The growth of capitalism during this era led to an expansion of wealth, the growth of the middle class, and the rise of Enlightenment thinkers who challenged the power of monarchs and championed the virtues of the free market, individualism, freedom, and human rights. These ideals also led to new thinking about marriage, such as the contention that it should be based on free choice and romantic love. Although Enlightenment ideals were rarely expanded to include equality for women, they did arguably elevate the status of women

by suggesting that marriages should be entered into by mutual consent and that women were partners in marriage rather than a form of property.

Such ideals influenced the Europeans who migrated to the New World to expand the British Empire. The chapter concludes by looking at the gender and racial order they created in the New World and how the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy affected families. During the early decades of the twentieth century, America struggled to create breadwinner-homemaker families and, by the mid-1940s, had succeeded in promoting itself as a middle class society. Such illusion, however, proved short-lived, and by the 1970s social inequality was again on the national agenda. In the ensuing decades, social class inequality among Americans spiraled, creating a pattern of social class polarization that included greater wealth for the wealthy, deeper poverty and economic hardship for the working class and poor, and a notable decline in the middle class.

## Families and Marriage: A Brief History

Sociologists understand families to be social institutions that perform vital functions for their members and societies: They produce, nurture, and socialize children; care for frail and elderly family members; provide the laborers needed for the economy; and meet the emotional needs of family members. To describe families as social entities recognizes the fact that they are socially created and defined and vary across cultures; to refer to them as institutions means that they embody a set of interrelated roles and responsibilities. Cross-cultural differences, the changing nature of families, and political forces often have made defining the family a matter of some contention. By the mid-twentieth century, social scientists had developed definitions of the family that seemed broadly inclusive in terms of capturing the essence of family life across cultures. For example, one family scholar defined the family based on its structure, functions, and attributes, noting that

[The family] consists of husband, wife, and children born in their wedlock, though other relatives may find their place close to this nuclear group; and the group is united by moral, legal, economic, religious, and social rights and obligations (including sexual rights and prohibitions as well as such socially patterned feelings as love, attraction, piety, and awe). (Coser [1964] 2004:13)

But even seemingly broad definitions of the family such as this are contested by scholars who point out that families are not always based on heterosexuality and marriage and do not always include children, nuclear households, romantic love, or consensual sexual relations (Gittins 1993).

## The Concept of Marriage

Empirical evidence on the origins of marriage is scant, as it evolved cross-culturally at different times and has been defined in various ways. There is considerable agreement that as an institution, marriage is not as old as families. Whether the earliest societies had monogamous or polygamous marriages, practiced sexual restraint or sexual freedom, or were ruled by women (matriarchal) or men (patriarchal) were once issues that were much debated among social scientists, although those debates produced social theories that were based more on ideology than empirical facts (Lamanna 2002:41). For example, Friedrich Engels, a nineteenth-century social critic of capitalistic economies and patriarchal families, argued that maternal families existed in early primitive societies, where property was held communally, sexual relations were casual, and the family, when it was distinct from the larger group, was defined as mothers and their children (Adams and Steinmetz 1993). Cross-cultural studies offer numerous examples of cultures that have maternal families, although it bears noting that maternal families (in which mother-child relations and female-centered kin units are central, and fathers are more marginal) were not usually matriarchal families or families in which women held most of the power (Reuter and Runner 1931). Conversely, more religiously based theories held that male-dominated, monogamous marriages were God-ordained and had always existed. For many, such issues were important in understanding family change; however, by the mid-1900s most had abandoned such debates in favor of research on the new family system that was emerging as a result of the industrial economy (Lasch 1977).

The definition of marriage is less contested than its history: Marriage has almost universally been defined as a social and legal union between men and women, although a few cultures have allowed people of the same sex to marry (Coontz 2005). Sociologist Max Weber defined marriage as a “stable sexual relationship” allowed and legitimized by the larger kin group and used to determine rules about property rights for children (R. Collins 1986:276). The majority of marriages are based on monogamy—a union between one woman and one man—but many societies also have allowed people to have more than one spouse, or polygamous marriages. The Talmud, which comprises Jewish religious law and customs, allows men to have as many as four wives. Whether monogamous or polygamous, marriage systems do not emerge in a vacuum but, like families, are social institutions that serve a purpose. Thus, the practice of polygyny (or multiple wives) was often a strategy for increasing the population size, ensuring the production of male heirs or ensuring that all women in the society were taken care

of when men were in short supply. Similarly, polyandry (or multiple husbands), though extremely rare, is associated with a shortage of women (sometimes due to female infanticide) and poverty. In this case, a young girl or woman may be betrothed to and shared by several brothers, thereby negating the need for them to divide meager resources or individually take on the role of supporting a wife.

Across cultures, the most universal feature of marriage has been gender division of labor between men and women (Coontz 2005; Buechler 2008). Almost everywhere, women's work has centered on activities that can be done at or near the home, such as gardening, gathering plants, weaving, pottery, and the care of small animals, while hunting, plowing, and herding cattle have typically been the work of men (R. Collins 1986). The fact that only women can give birth to and breastfeed children makes them the logical caregivers for children and is at the root of the gender division of family labor. Women's reproductive roles, however, historically did not exempt them from participating in economic labor, nor did they inherently lead to male domination. Although no cultures have been found that define women as the dominant group and nearly all subscribe at least ideologically to patriarchy, the degree of gender stratification across cultures ranges from near equality to extreme inequality. The integration of women into productive labor and kinship structures that emphasize blood ties over marital ties (Sanday 1981) and the ability of women to have children (Buechler 2008:193) often enhances their social status even when patriarchy is the cultural norm.

## Early Hunting and Gathering Societies

Early foraging societies predated the discovery of agriculture. In such economies, small groups of nomadic people eked out a living as hunters and gatherers, often surviving at the subsistence level. Scarcity was often the norm, as were reciprocity and sharing. All members of the group—men, women, and children—were expected to contribute to the production of food. In subsistence economies, supporting nonproducers often threatened the survival of the group, and population size was kept small by means of abortion, infanticide, and sometimes even abandonment of the elderly.

Most scholars believe that a relative degree of social equality existed in foraging societies because most of them lacked surplus resources, the concept of private property, or the knowledge of biological paternity (Shlain 2003). Marriages or male-female partnering was likely informal, easily dissolved, and secondary to kinship ties, and there was little emphasis on

female virginity, paternity, or lifelong unions, so there was no real incentive for men to dominate women (Coltrane and Adams 2008:54). Less nomadic hunting and gathering societies were sometimes matrilineal and allowed polyandry as a marital rule: Women could take several husbands, and the children retained the clan name of their mothers. Polyandrous marriage and matrilineal families were found in Hawaii and native populations in the Americas, Southeast Asia, and West Africa (Glassman, Swatos, and Denison 2004).

Until recent decades, it was common for social scientists studying families in cross-cultural context to use a developmental paradigm that saw all families as evolving from the simple, primitive entities that existed in foraging societies to the modern entities that emerged with industrialization (Lamanna 2002; Leeder 2004). Although this perspective still holds sway in some circles, the developmental paradigm is laden with ethnocentric assumptions because it contends that the diverse family forms found among non-Europeans are proof that they are spiritually or morally depraved (Thornton 2005). Moreover, the premise that the earliest economies, such as those based on hunting and gathering, are invariably evolving into modern economies is erroneous. Economies based mostly on hunting and gathering still exist today, with levels of technology and cultural practices that are diverse and have changed over time. Most are no longer nomadic, and they have gained considerable control over their environments and created complex political, social, and kinship systems. While scarcity is still often the norm, this has not precluded the development of stratification systems based on access to resources or status factors, such as being healers, hunters, chiefs, or religious leaders.

## **Settled Agricultural Societies: The Rise of Social Inequalities**

Although inequalities were not unheard of in simple hunting and gathering societies, notable economic inequalities between people began to emerge 9,000–12,000 years ago in the Middle East when the cultivation of plants led to the development of agrarian economies based on farming and land ownership. For scholars, the creation of agrarian economies marked the advent of civilization, defined as settled societies that became increasingly complex (e.g., based on written rules and laws) and based on hierarchical relationships between people. Small-scale agrarian economies paved the way for larger agricultural economies, which turned plant cultivation and the domestication of animals into a major, and often scientific, enterprise. With

such economies came the concept of personal ownership of labor and other natural resources, inheritance rights, the rise of serf and slave labor to plant and harvest crops, and the creation of political and economic laws to protect wealth (Rossides 1997:22–24).

Settled economies led to population growth, surplus production, and specialized occupations and institutions, all of which created the basis for a hierarchy among people based on wealth and status. Although the number of occupations increased, among those in agrarian and agricultural economies the most basic divisions are between two polarized groups: governing elites and peasants, landowners and the landless, or aristocratic/royal elites and the masses (Bowser 2007). Warfare and standing armies also emerged with agrarian and later large-scale agricultural economies, and they became significant for subordinating and stratifying populations. Social divisions between people in medieval Europe were often reflected in estate systems of stratification, with warfare the most important form of social power and one's legal status, rights, and privileges derived from family of birth.

## Transformations in Families and Marriages

Families were gradually reshaped by the discovery of agriculture; for example, the right to own land and pass it on to heirs meant that women's child-bearing abilities and male domination became more important. Rather than kinship, marriage became the center of family life and was increasingly based on a formal contractual relationship between men, women, and their kinship groups. The property and gender implications of marriage are evident in the exchange of gifts between spouses and families and clearly defined rules about the rights and responsibilities of each marital partner. During the Middle Ages, economic factors influenced marital choices more than affection, even among the poor, and women's sexuality was treated as a form of property (Coltrane and Adams 2008:54). Wealth and power inequalities meant that marriages among the elite and/or governing classes were based largely on creating political alliances and producing male children (Coontz 2005). Ensuring paternity became important in the transfer of property to legitimate heirs, and the rights and sexuality of women were circumscribed. Ideologies of male domination prevailed, and women, especially those who were married to powerful men, were typically treated like chattel and given very few rights.

The property-like status of women was evident in Western societies like Rome and Greece, where wives were taken solely for the purpose of bearing legitimate children and, in most cases, were treated like dependents and

confined to activities such as caring for children, cooking, and keeping house (Ingoldsby 2006). The marriage trends of the elites were often embraced, at least ideologically, by the other social classes, even when they lacked the resources to conform to such ideologies. The focus on legalizing marriage and male domination became common among all classes, although among the less affluent there was less property to transfer to legitimate heirs, and patriarchy was mediated by the contributions of women to the family income.

### The Merging of Religion, Law, and Family Life

The growing emphasis on formal marriage contracts and patriarchy was reinforced in Western societies by the influence of Christianity and the law. Christianity was initially seen as a sect of Judaism, but with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in AD 313, it became the established religion and rose to dominate European social life for centuries (Goldthorpe 1987). Christianity may have helped foster monogamy, but it distinguished itself from its forebearer, Judaism, by breaking away from Jewish traditions—which had celebrated married life, marital sexuality, and especially procreation—and providing a more circumspect view of marriage. The exposure of early Christians to the overt sexuality and eroticism that was common in Rome (Coltrane and Adams 2008:49), along with the Apostle Paul's denunciation of marriage and the belief that the return of Jesus was imminent, led church leaders to eschew marriage and teach that celibacy was a higher, more exalted way of life. For many, there was an inherent conflict between pursuing the spirit and satisfying the flesh, and marriage led to the latter. Marriage was allowed, but commonly seen as a union created as the result of original sin. Thus, in most cases, marriage ceremonies had to be held outside the church doors, and a sense of impurity surrounded even marital sex and childbearing (Coltrane and Adams 2008). The marginalization of family life and marriage by early Christianity reinforced traditions that were unique to Western Europe and enhanced the wealth of the Church. Goldthorpe (1987) points out that bilateral kinship, consensual marriages, singleness as a viable option, and the nuclear family structure were common in Western Europe even before the influence of Christianity. But this restricted sense of kinship helped the Church become immensely wealthy, as its teachings discouraged marriage, stated that Christians should put the needs of the Church before family loyalties, and encouraged them to leave their property to the Church rather than to relatives (pp. 12–13).



Around AD 1200, however, there was a reversal of this doctrine. Both Christian leaders and the state began to assume a larger role in defining and governing marriages, and within a century they had declared marriage a sacrament of the Christian Church and an indissoluble union (Yalom 2001; Thornton et al. 2007). Not all Christians accepted the notion of marriage as a sacrament, which essentially placed entering and dissolving marital unions under the control of the Church. Protestantism especially rejected this teaching, and the numerous sects it fostered drew on the Bible to justify a variety of marriage practices, including polygamy. Over time, however, mainstream Christian teachings supporting monogamy, nonmarital chastity, and marital fidelity were seen as strengthening the nuclear family, although they did little to elevate the position of women (Ingoldsby 2006).

As the state and Church initiated efforts to regulate marriage, it became the core of the family; however, the debate over how one entered a legal marriage continued in most Western nations through the early 1900s. People often rejected the idea of religious and state control over marriage or, more practically, simply ignored such rules about licenses and ceremonies because they lived in remote areas that made it difficult for them to avail themselves of bureaucratic procedures. The long tradition of informal marriages—described as “self-marriages” or “living tally”—continued, and it was common for poor people to live as married without benefit of legal ceremony (Cherlin 2009). As Nancy Cott (2000:28) explains, the federal government had few ways to enforce its views on marriage, and state laws varied, often only specifying that marriages could not be bigamous, incestuous, or easily terminated. Thus, although states and religious authorities had been given the authority to perform marriage ceremonies, there was ambiguity over exactly what constituted a legal marriage. The most common bases for declaring marriages valid were mutual consent, cohabitation, and sexual consummation of the relationship, although not all of these criteria had to be met for a legally recognized marriage to exist (Thornton et al. 2007:60).

## **Institutionalizing Inequalities: Gender and Race**

Although defining marriage and enforcing marriage rules were often difficult, there was substantial agreement across cultures on one point: Men were to be the dominant partner in the marriage or the heads of their families, and wives were to be subservient and obedient to their husbands. This gender ideology, of course, evolved over time. Most would contend that it was weakest in early hunting and gathering societies, when there was

little reason for men and women to form exclusive sexual relationships or prioritize marriage. Still, the dual burdens of bearing children and engaging in productive labor may have made it more difficult for women to survive alone and led them to attach themselves to men, who took advantage of the weaker position of women by forcing them into subordination (Reuter and Runner 1931). Other theories resonate with this perspective, suggesting that women needed the provision and protection of men and gradually came to trade the exclusive right to their sexuality to men who could provide these things. Coontz (2005) opines, however, that this provider-protector theory of male domination casts women as helpless entities and ignores much evidence of the powerful and productive roles they have played in many societies. Leonard Shlain (2003) also accords women a more active role in creating the gender order. He argues that among early humans, women were first to recognize the link between sex, pregnancy, and childbirth—an important discovery, given that the perils associated with childbearing often cost them their lives. As a result, women managed to break the estrus cycle and, to better their chances of survival, offer sex more selectively to those men who could provide them with more nutritious food (especially meat) and safety.

In all likelihood, a number of biological, economic, and ideological factors—such as the discovery of biological paternity, greater male strength, weapons, surplus wealth, and institutionalized religions—all converged in fostering male domination in marriages and in the broader societies. In settled societies, gender inequality became the norm, although the intensity of it varied based on the ability of societies to differentiate the roles of men and women (Buechler 2008) and the degree to which women were integrated into the work force and the kinship structure of their families of origin (Sanday 1981). Whatever women's actual roles in society, most of the major organized religions support the subordination of women as God-ordained. The Hebrew Scriptures provide a rationale for male dominance in the early chapters: Eve disobeyed God, led her husband to do so, and was punished by God by being placed under the rule of her husband. As Ingoldsby (2006) points out, the Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly reinforce the subordinate status of women; for example, women are included in the list of domestic property that one is forbidden from coveting in the Ten Commandments, labeled as unclean because of menstruation and childbirth, held to a double standard of sexuality, and subjected to divorce for practically any reason given by their husbands (pp. 42–43). The Scriptures, however, have a different set of rules for men: Men can have more than one wife, have a wife who is found not to be a virgin killed, and require strict obedience and even a male child if the marriage is to be sustained (Yalom 2001).

One result has been that since the Middle Ages marriage contracts have deemed men the legal heads of their families and assigned them responsibility for and control over women and families. As Lenore Weitzman (1981) explains, in English law the doctrine of coverture suspended the identity and personhood of a wife, which was legally merged with that of her husband, so in most places she lost control over her own property and wages, the right to enter contracts, and the right to sue or be sued. As the heads of their families, men determined the legal residence for the family and their standard of living; could discipline their wives and command their marital, sexual, and domestic services; and could claim or control their earnings or any property they owned (Reuter and Runner 1931:158).

These patriarchal marital ideals were incompatible with the rise of Enlightenment ideologies during the 1500s. An important element of these ideologies was the rejection of hierarchal and authoritarian relationships, which led to a greater emphasis on liberty and individual freedoms. Although these concepts primarily focused on the political rights and economic freedom of men, they also spawned new thinking about marriage relationships. Men were still held as the natural heads of their families, but many argued that marriages should be monogamous and based on mutual affection and consent. These emerging marital ideologies held that there should be symmetry (although not equality) between married men and their wives in their education and lifestyles and described marriage as the “highest instance of human friendship” and as “loving partnerships” (Cott 2000:16). But overall, Enlightenment thinkers were not inclined to see women and men as equal actors in the social and political arenas or in family life. Most failed to consider how male-headed marriages based on female economic dependence undermined the ideal of women entering marriages based solely on free choice and affection. Moreover, some feminist scholars have argued that the concept of affection-based marriage in many ways devalued kinship and family by making them more optional and elevated the importance of those arenas dominated by men—the market and the state.

## Racial and Ethnic Stratification

The concept of race and racial stratification systems also emerged with agricultural societies, where surplus production and expansionist tendencies created an almost insatiable demand for raw materials, labor, and new markets. Although slavery is ancient in origin, the development of agricultural economies led to brutal forms of chattel slavery and colonialism; for example, by the tenth century some Middle Eastern nations had instituted a race-based slavery system, notably the trafficking of black Africans. By

the 1400s, Europeans had begun a pattern of international travel and trade that exploited and colonized people of color in India, Asia, Africa, and South America, using them as both cheap labor and markets for Western products (Duiker and Spielvogel 1994). Through colonialist policies, Europeans gained control over the economies in many less-developed nations, placing themselves in positions of power and endowing a handful of locals—usually those who were willing to embrace Western behaviors—with power over other members of the native population (Leeder 2004:95). Howard Winant (2001) argues that the colonist and empire-building practices of Europeans constituted an early global racial formation project that cast native peoples around the world as racial others (pp. 20–25). In the process, whiteness was socially constructed as a racial category, and the most basic divisions became that between being white and non-white, or European and non-European.

Europeans' contact with people of color on other continents, many of whom lacked sophisticated technologies and weapons and had not been exposed to Christianity, fostered ethnocentric attitudes among Europeans; most held themselves and their culture to be naturally superior. Their ethnocentric attitudes provided the rationale for exploiting people of color, who were often seen as less than human but also in need of Christian morality or the civilizing influence of Western culture. These views were reinforced during the 1800s by the social science studies that placed the European ideal of monogamous, nuclear families at the apex of civilization and assumed that all other families were “primitive” or lacking in development (Lamanna 2002). This racial division resulted in negative and even punitive images of most non-Europeans, who were seen as having backward and primitive cultures, and such images justified excluding them from Enlightenment doctrines of natural rights, rationality, and freedom (Winant 2001:72).

## **Social Inequalities in Colonial America**

The Europeans who began to settle in the British colonies of North America in the 1600s came in pursuit of greater economic opportunity and religious freedom and brought with them an implicit faith in the rectitude of their own cultural heritage. The acceptance of social inequalities was part of that heritage, and the class system that emerged in the New World approximated the one that had developed in Europe by the mid-1600s. Historian Howard Zinn ([1980] 2003) explains that during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, more than half the colonists came as servants, many of

them forced into exile from Europe in its effort to rid itself of “rogues and vagabonds” (p. 42). As Zinn pointed out, colonial society “was not democratic and certainly not egalitarian; it was dominated by men who had money enough to make others work for them” (p. 46). Populist resentment against the wealthy and elite, which often led to rebellions and riots, was common, and by the 1700s, poor houses were being created to quell the unrest.

Although there was some racial and ethnic diversity in the early colonial population, the majority of the three million white Europeans who came to the colonies from the early 1600s until 1790 were from England (Schaefer 2008), and they set the tone for political and cultural life in the New World. Many who left England—but especially the Puritans who migrated voluntarily—were fleeing from a place where industrialization and modernization was in its early stages and producing unprecedented economic and social changes. One of their goals was pursuing traditional or “Old World” ideas about marriages and families that were in decline in England (Mintz and Kellogg 1988). They wanted to create godly families, defined primarily as patriarchal institutions in which men ruled over their wives, but they also wanted to extend the rights and benefits of marriage to more people (e.g., certain groups of people in England could not marry or inherit property; Zinn and Eitzen 2002:38). Many rejected the rising status of women that had emerged with the industrial economy in England—autonomy that was being gained as a result of high rates of female employment and the growing emphasis on women’s property and marital rights—in favor of a society based on religious traditions and a clear gender hierarchy. In their view, married women owed their husbands loyalty and obedience; thus, in early America, a man had “nearly absolute authority over his wife . . . including the right to administer physical correction” (Walsh 1985:4).

But even in the New World, patriarchal ideologies were mitigated by the fact that the productive and reproductive labor of women was much in demand. Women played an important role in establishing the American colonies and endured immense hardships in helping their husbands build and furnish homes and provide for families (Goodsell 1934). The shortage of women—due to the fact that men were more likely to immigrate and women had a high rate of maternal mortality—also increased the value of women. The family-based economy of the agricultural era required the labor of all able-bodied family members, and women played an essential role in the survival of families. Families had a broad array of functions to fulfill and were seen as little commonwealths that were vital to the survival of individuals and the community. The functions of families during that era have been described this way:

[The family] raised the food and made most of the clothing and furniture for early settlers. It taught children to read, worship their God, and care for each other in sickness and in old age. It was a workplace, a school, a vocational training agency, and a place of worship, and it carried the heavy burden of responsibility for maintaining social order and stability. (Mintz and Kellogg 1988:1)

Thus, marriage was often considered an economic partnership between men and women, formed to help ensure that the material needs of families were supplied. This definitely extended the type of work women were able to perform; in fact, some scholars have held that colonial women could perform any kind of work they wanted to—as long as it was acceptable to their husbands and understood as helping the family (Ingoldsby 2006).

As the colonial population grew, the rigidity of patriarchal rules in families varied regionally and weakened over time and was especially compromised as the economy transitioned from agriculture to industry. For example, women in urban areas typically had more freedom than those in rural areas, and unmarried females had more freedom than married women. In his study of the journals of Europeans who visited America in the 1800s, Furstenberg (1966) noted that most commented favorably on the freedom given to young women, even in matters of courtship and marriage, and the power and authority that wives often had in the domestic arena. Although such gender patterns are consistent with Western ideologies of equality and freedom, they likely attracted attention because gender inequalities were even more striking in other nations.

Patriarchal rules also influenced the lives of children in colonial America because fathers were the sole guardians of their children and determined their education, religious training, and marriages (Goodsell 1934). The prevailing childrearing philosophy, at least among Christians, was that parents needed to rid children of their innately sinful nature, so severe discipline was common and in most eastern colonies laws supported the penalty of death for unruly and obstinate children (Goodsell 1934). This has raised the question of the status of children not just in colonial America, but historically. Some historians have traced a long history of the abuse and neglect of children in many societies and have argued that parents were not particularly emotionally attached to their children. Children were often seen as economic burdens or economic assets, and in the latter case, they were expected to work and contribute to the support of families.

In colonial America, the view that children were innately sinful and the high rate of childhood mortality may have created some emotional distance between parents and children. As Coltrane and Adams (2008) explain,

before the 1900s, more than half of all parents had lost at least one child, and childhood death did not usually result in long periods of grieving (p. 138). Other scholars have contended that parents have always loved and valued their children, although this pattern of parent-child relationship may have been more evident in some regions and time periods than others. By the 1800s, European visitors to America sometimes observed that parents were overly permissive and failed to properly discipline their children (Furstenberg 1966). Social class and regional differences probably resulted in differences in how parents reared their children, and patterns of child-rearing also changed over time as the economy became more industrialized. Parents who did not rely on children to contribute to the support of the family were likely to be more emotionally indulgent and less strict than those who did.

### Confronting the Racial “Other”

European explorers had contact with native populations in various parts of the world as early as the 1400s, often in the context of market trade. The decision to settle in areas occupied by native populations, however, posed a new set of challenges as it brought competition for land and natural resources and exposed groups to immense cultural differences. Europeans, for example, defined basic morality largely in terms of their understanding of proper family relations, yet they found themselves in a land inhabited by as many as two million native peoples, or Native Americans, who did not embrace those values. Native Americans had lived in North America for centuries before the arrival of Europeans and were organized in tribes that were extremely diverse: They spoke at least 200 different languages and had a variety of cultural practices (Zinn and Eitzen 2002:37), many of which deviated from European concepts of Christian morality or proper gender relations. Native American women, for example, were often farmers, and European settlers sought to train them in proper European gender roles (Ingoldsby 2006). Native American tribes had a variety of family systems; they often married during early adolescence, sometimes without ceremony, and many practiced polygamy. In quite a few tribes, descent was traced through mothers, and women were producers who owned property and held high-status positions. Europeans often described these marriage practices as “unintelligibly foreign,” according to historian Cott (2000), and believed that Native American men, who were hunters but did not exert much authority over their families or cultivate or own land, were simply unmanly and lazy (p. 25).

The diversity of family practices Europeans encountered among indigenous tribes in North America reinforced the views of colonists that there was widespread savagery among native populations and that they had a mandate to spread order, civilization, and Christianity through missionary work, legislation, and coercion (Thornton 2005). Despite their view of Native Americans as deficient, whites reasoned that it was possible to civilize the tribes by spreading Christianity and the virtues of European culture. Efforts were made to convince Native Americans to accept monogamous marriage, a conventional sexual division of labor, and the concepts of private property and inheritance (Cott 2000:26). Many Native Americans complied with these efforts, while others resisted, engaged in warfare, and eventually were decimated or moved to reservations (Thornton 2005).

### African American Families

Racial diversity in the colonies was also enhanced by the growing number of Africans being brought to the continent. During the early 1600s, Africans were already beginning to arrive in the New World, some as indentured servants. Indentured servitude for Africans, however, was gradually transformed into perpetual servitude, or a system of slavery based on race and heredity. Winant (2001) argues that the investment in slaves was the first and largest capital investment of the era, and slavery was the “motor” of early capitalist development (p. 47). By 1790, when the first census was taken, there were 750,000 Africans living in the country—20 percent of the entire population—and 90 percent of them were slaves (Mintz and Kellogg, 1988).

Enslaved blacks brought with them a variety of family practices from pre-colonial West African societies, some of which paralleled those found in the New World (e.g., patriarchal ideology, economically productive roles for women, high rates of fertility) and others which were different (e.g., polygamy, early sexuality and marriage, extended kin relations). Slavery prioritized the labor roles of Africans over their family roles and, in the process, reinforced African family practices that did not resonate with Christian or mainstream American values. Indeed, many abolitionists argued that the worst abuse of slavery was its “outrage upon the families” of black people and accused Southern slaveholders of breeding slaves like oxen and of maintaining “black harems” of sexually exploited black women (Mintz and Kellogg 1988: 67, 77).

Slavery inherently undermined the ability of Africans to form stable families because slaves were considered property and slave owners could treat them and sell them as they saw fit. Researchers have found that the family life of slaves varied over the duration of slavery and from region to



region, with the size the plantation and the economic solvency of slaveholders shaping the stability of family life: Overall, slaveholders owning smaller, more economically marginal plantations offered a limited supply of potential partners for marriage. As Mintz and Kellogg (1988) explain, the majority of slave owners in the South had fewer than 20 slaves, most of them related to each other. In addition, slaveholders with only a few slaves were more likely to have to sell slaves and separate families and were more likely to engage in sexual liaisons with enslaved blacks (Franklin 1997). Even when enslaved *families* achieved stability, *marriages* tended to be more difficult to enter into and sustain. During the early decades of slavery, a skewed sex ratio—considerably more men than women—made it impossible for all men to find marital partners. But even on larger plantations, at least one-third of husbands had wives who lived elsewhere and were often restricted to weekend visits (Mintz and Kellogg 1988).

Enslaved Africans in Northern areas often did not fare much better when it came to creating stable marriages and families. Northern slaveholders usually owned fewer slaves; in 1790, half of them owned only one slave (Dabel 2002). This scarcity of blacks was compounded by the fact that many Northern slaveholders preferred to own enslaved women who were single and childless, or at least whose children were living elsewhere. This lowered rates of marriage among black women: Jane Dabel found, for example, that among black women living in New York between 1850 and 1870, two-thirds were unmarried. Equally important in undermining marriage was the fact that slave marriages had no legal sanction, and couples could be separated or sold at the discretion of slaveholders.

Even when marriages existed, the property status of blacks and the arduous labor demanded of men and women made it impossible for them to create families that adhered to mainstream values. Although enslaved Africans accepted the ideology of patriarchal families, it was difficult for men to achieve authority in their families when they lived on other plantations, had little control over how their wives and children were provided for, and could not protect them from the abuses of slavery. Like men, enslaved women were defined first and foremost as laborers, and they typically found extended kin networks a more reliable source of help with children than marriage. Most enslaved black women worked in the fields and counted on others to watch their children. Those who were domestic workers garnered a certain status and social-cultural capital from their close association with white families, and such workers tended to be women. This further undermined male domination among enslaved Africans and elevated the status of black women who performed domestic work; they often had access to better food, which they could share with other family members, and were privy to

vital information about events and issues on the plantation (Jones 1985; Hine and Thompson 1998).

The families of free black people, most of whom had once been slaves, still bore the mark of slavery, including precarious race relations and a fragile economic standing. Prior to the Civil War, there were about 250,000 free blacks living in the country, and most of them had either been freed or escaped from slavery (Mintz and Kellogg 1988). Free blacks occupied an ambiguous space between slavery and freedom, with enforced segregation affecting most areas of life and restricting their rights and movements. A significant number of free blacks lived in single-mother families, as women were more likely than men to be free. Studying the family life of free blacks who lived in Norfolk, Virginia, prior to abolition, Bogger (1997) reported that families were almost equally likely to be headed by men as women, although this may have been because free men commonly left the area in search of work. Those who stayed held a variety of occupations and, with a bounty of women to choose from, often had wives who were much younger than they were. These families performed the same functions as other colonial families, with the added responsibility of helping friends and family members gain their freedom.

## Industrialization and the Modern Family

Industrialization began in England in the eighteenth century, displacing thousands of agricultural workers, creating family-based cottage systems of industry that drew on the labor of the entire family, and ultimately downgrading the lives of millions of Europeans. Felix Greene (1971), for example, writes that starting in the late 1700s, thousands of Enclosure Acts were passed that dispossessed people of their land and livelihood and created human suffering beyond imagination. According to Greene,

The emergence of a huge, property-less and impoverished working class was precisely what the new industrialists wished for. They could, and did, dictate their own conditions. . . . For wages that would barely keep them alive, workers were herded into huge slums that had no sewerage, no adequate water supply, no beauty, no cultural amenities, no playgrounds. The company-built hovels in which they had to live were of such meanness that today it would be illegal to use them to house animals. (P. 92)

By the mid-nineteenth century, the industrial economy was struggling to meet the demands of the new markets being opened around the world, and

factories sprang up in cities and towns. Children and women were often as capable as men of operating the machinery in factories, and they entered the factory labor system in large numbers. This potential for economic independence altered families by making children less reliant on families for their survival and women freer from male domination. By the mid-1800s, the notion that women “had minds and characters worthy of broad and thorough training” was gaining strength, and longstanding laws making married men the sole legal guardians of their children and giving them control over the property of their wives were being challenged and changed (Goodsell 1934).

### The Spread of Industrialization to the New World

This economic transition and the liberal ideologies that were emerging helped fuel the migration of more Europeans to the New World. Although some were simply uprooted by the new economic order, others sought to create a society in which traditional marital and family ideologies would prevail. But by the mid-1800s, the U.S. economy was also undergoing industrialization, and by 1900, it had emerged as the world’s leading industrial nation (Gilbert 2003). This economic transition took more than a century and resulted in massive social, geographical, and family changes. Industrialization shifted populations from rural to urban areas in search of work; for example, in 1830 most Americans still lived in rural areas and were employed in farming, but by 1930, most lived in towns and cities and were engaged in non-farming occupations (p. 51). Urbanization, immigration, and adjustment to the industrial labor market took a toll on the stability of families. Industrial production undermined the family-based economy, food production technologies reduced the need for farmers, and essentials once produced by families were now produced in massive quantities in factories. New professional institutions emerged (e.g., public schools, hospitals) and assumed responsibility for many of the functions once fulfilled by families, ultimately making people less dependent on the family and leading some social scientists to predict its demise.

The industrial economy is linked to a social class system of stratification, in which mobility is possible and ostensibly based on effort and hard work. The industrial economy resulted in substantial wealth, but neither wealth nor the opportunity to acquire it was distributed equally in the population. As had been the case in Europe, the first decades of industrialization produced downward mobility for most men; in 1870, and for the first time in U.S. history, more men were working for other people than for themselves, often with little control over their workday or wages (Buechler 2008:146).

The industrial laborers who composed the working class toiled long hours for low wages in working conditions that were deplorable and dangerous; for example, in 1897 the average work week was 60 hours, and a survey conducted in 1907 found that at the very least, a half million workers had been killed, crippled, or seriously injured on the job (Gilbert 2003:55). Although working conditions improved over time, by the 1920s, the living conditions for the majority of workers were still poor (Hurst 2004:317). Goodsell (1934:493) wrote that in 1927, 41 million of the 45 million employed Americans were exempt from filing income reports with the federal government because their earnings were too low to be taxed. Workers were frequently in conflict with employers over working conditions and unfair labor practices, and by the turn of the twentieth century, worker strikes had become common.

### Racial and Ethnic Inequality in Industrial America

The challenge of adapting to the industrial economy was further complicated by a rapid increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of the population. The majority of the nearly three million people who immigrated to the United States between 1800 and 1850 were from the eastern and southern regions of Europe (Mintz and Kellogg 1988) and, based on the dominant English notion of race, they were not considered “white” and thus were seen as a social and economic threat. Even more threatening than the influx of white ethnics was the growing population of people of color. Much of that racial diversity was a result of territorial expansion: In 1845, John O’Sullivan declared that it was the manifest destiny of white Europeans to “overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions,” and a few years later, the United States purchased New Mexico, California, and Texas from Mexico for the price of \$15 million (Zinn [1980] 2003:151–153). In addition, there were 200,000 Chinese who had migrated to the United States between 1850 and 1880, many in search of gold or the new jobs that were opening in the western region of the country (Schaefer 2008). Their entry into the labor market sparked intense competition for jobs and eventually led to the passage by Congress in 1882 of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited immigration from China. Chinese, along with other Asians who came to the United States, found themselves in a racially stratified labor market, where skin color predicted position more than did education or skills. By the 1920s, additional restrictive immigration policies were passed that favored immigrants from northern Europe (Schaefer 2008).

The release of four million African Americans from slavery in the 1860s added to the racial diversity of the new labor force, although most remained in the rural South and worked in the rapidly declining agricultural economy. Few economic opportunities were available for the newly freed slaves, and many who left the homes of their former owners found themselves adrift, homeless, and facing starvation. The majority of former slaves, however, moved into a sharecropping system, with living and working conditions—and wages—that closely resembled slavery. The threat posed by the loss of black labor led some states to create and enforce labor contracts between black workers and white land owners, justifying them on the premise that employment was essential to the transition from slavery to citizenship (Franklin 2000). In many cases, African Americans who had skilled positions lost their jobs after emancipation, as racial fears, threats and rumors of racial insurrections, and negative racial images intensified. African Americans in some Southern states gained political rights during the era of Reconstruction, but those measures were being rapidly repealed by the latter nineteenth century: In 1896, scarcely 30 years after the abolition of slavery, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision made segregation the law of the land. By the turn of the twentieth century, Southern racial violence, the waning agricultural economy, and the lure of factory jobs in cities sparked a massive shift in the black population from the rural South to the urban North.

Racial stratification characterized the labor market until after the civil rights era of the 1960s, with most African Americans being firmly at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. Still, the first iteration of the black middle class had emerged after slavery and was mostly composed of light-skinned African Americans who were heirs and/or direct beneficiaries of white slave owners. Other racial/ethnic groups fared little better: Asian Americans, many of whom were highly skilled and educated, were working as grocers and gardeners (Sakamoto et al. 2009).

## Gender in Industrial America

The reorganization of work in the industrial economy disrupted the gender order of many families by pulling women into the paid labor force and spawning new visions of gender equality. As had been the case in England, American women, especially those who were young and single, entered the labor market in substantial numbers. In the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, women made up nearly 75 percent of all employees and they worked more than 70 hours a week, often in deplorable working conditions (Hurst, 2004:61). Although women were legally paid

less than men, and therefore still benefited economically by marrying, the growing ability of single women to earn a living made many, especially those who were educated, reconsider the value of marriage. Many women came to rely on themselves and enjoy the freedom of independence, and the rate of marriage decreased with industrialization. New ideologies of marriage based on free choice, romantic love, and companionship spread and led to a surge in the divorce rate, which more than tripled between the late 1860s and 1910 (Cherlin, 1992). Goodsell (1934), for example, noted that in 1885 alone more marriages were dissolved in the United States than in all the rest of the Christian world combined. Married couples increasingly expected their marriages to be based on companionship, affection, and partnership, and were less likely to tolerate unfulfilling marriages.

Notably, the first wave of feminism emerged during the mid-1800s, with many women demanding the right to vote, participate in public life, own property, use birth control, attend college, and control their own bodies (Calhoun 1997). For the most part, however, early feminism did not challenge dominant ideologies about marriage, family, or the breadwinner-homemaker division of labor (Gordon 1976). Women, especially those who were married to economically affluent men, found it prestigious to be exempt from productive labor, provided for by their husbands, and free to devote their time to the care of their children and homes. Affluent women often saw gender equality in the public arena as a threat to the family (Camhi 2007), and many who supported education and reproductive rights for women did so because they believed that these rights would enable women to be better wives and mothers. The major barrier to the acceptance and creation of breadwinner-homemaker families was simply the inability of many husbands to adequately support their wives. Thus, racial/ethnic minority, working-class, and poor families endured the most strains in trying to conform to the male wage-earner family model, but cycles of economic depression often challenged the viability of this family model for middle-class couples.

## The Sociological Study of Families

Early sociologists were primarily interested in understanding processes of modernity, the massive reorganization of society caused by industrialization and resulting in migration, urbanization, greater racial and ethnic diversity, and processes of assimilation. They saw social institutions, including families, as being transformed by these new economic and social forces and, given escalating rates of family instability, divorce, and non-marriage in the

late nineteenth century, many feared the demise of families. Moreover, families seemed to be losing important functions as societies modernized and marriage became optional rather than essential for survival. By the mid-1940s, with the American economy back on track and experiencing massive growth, concern over the demise of families was slowly being replaced by a celebration of the superiority of modern families as inherently middle class and based on a breadwinner-homemaker division of labor.

Talcott Parsons, perhaps the best-known family sociologist of the era, surmised that while the economic instability of the early twentieth century had adversely affected families, it had ultimately given rise to stronger, more specialized families (Parsons and Bales 1955). Whereas kinship structures dominate in primitive societies because they are necessary for survival, Parsons theorized that advanced societies underwent a process of structural differentiation that resulted in the creation of more non-kinship structures (e.g., churches, states, schools), each of which performed specialized functions (Parsons and Bales 1955:9). In the process, families had released most of their macro- or societal-level functions and were now free to take on more specialized micro-level functions, namely, the personality development of children and the social and emotional needs of spouses. Influenced by Freudian psychology and emerging research on the adverse consequences of maternal deprivation, Parsons was persuaded that the human personality was not inborn, but rather was constructed through elaborate family socialization processes, and that families also functioned to maintain and stabilize adult personalities. Families that functioned well were also specialized internally, with men taking on an occupational role and women a homemaker role. Although women may be in the labor market, especially those who are single, divorced, widowed, or childless, Parsons argued that there could be “no question of symmetry between the sexes in this respect, and . . . there is no serious tendency in this direction” (Parsons and Bales 1955:14).

## The Modern Isolated Nuclear Family

The modern family was seen primarily as a nuclear, marriage-based entity in which men provided economically for their families and women performed housework and took care of children. This gender division of family responsibility, described as the *doctrine of separate spheres*, held that men belonged in the public arena (or world of work) and women in the private arena, or the home. Socially defined notions of masculinity and femininity reflected these gendered family roles; for example, men were characterized as being naturally aggressive and rational—traits valuable in the competitive area of

work—and women as being essentially submissive, domestic, and nurturing. Based on what has been described as the *cult of true womanhood*, women were endowed with a higher sense of purity and morality than men. The breadwinner-homemaker family model was more available to economically affluent European American families, but by the early 1950s, several factors—the rise of labor unions and the demand that men be paid family wage—heightened access to this family model. Parsons and Bales (1955) described modern families as “isolated” because they were nuclear in structure (composed of parents and children); performed a limited, specific set of functions; and were less reliant on or connected to the broader kinship structures. Parsons opined that kinship dominated social structures in “primitive” societies, whereas non-kinship structures were dominant in “advanced” societies.

The notion of successful child socialization as a key function of the family, along with the reduced need for the economic labor of children as industrialization advanced, reshaped dominant attitudes and ideologies about children. Children in modern, middle-class families were increasingly seen as emotional rather than economic assets and as belonging more to mothers than to fathers. Endowed with this new sentimental value, they were the heart of the family, and being a good parent (or mother) required learning about child development and devoting considerable energy to socializing children. Whether or not childhood existed as a distinct stage of life in earlier societies, it was now clearly a prolonged period of life that included adolescence, a stage at which children began to negotiate their adult identities. Theories of child development proliferated during the early twentieth century, such as those proposed by psychologist Sigmund Freud and sociologist George Herbert Mead. Most saw children as moving through specific stages of development, propelled by both biological and social forces, and more emphasis was placed on their physical, social, and psychological needs. Legislators passed laws aimed at protecting and investing in children, such as mandatory education and policies ensuring their welfare, and many parents no longer saw rearing children as something that just came naturally.

More affluent families responded to this redefinition of children as precious and as requiring extensive parental investment by having fewer of them but investing more resources and time in raising each child. The fertility rate declined from six children per family in 1840 to three per family in 1900 (Kline 2001). Lower infant mortality rates also helped pave the way to reduced rates of childbearing, as did more effective birth control and the voluntary motherhood movement, although the underlying ideologies supporting controlled fertility differed. Birth control advocates argued for the right of women to control their fertility by using contraceptive technologies,



thus enhancing the quality of life for women and the physical and mental endowments of children (Gordon 1976). Those embracing the voluntary motherhood movement rejected birth control but argued that women should have the right to control their fertility by refusing sexual intercourse with their husbands, a move which promised to enable women to gain more control over their bodies, sexuality, and fertility. Overall, the notion of middle-class, child-centered, nuclear families headed by wage-earning husbands became the ideal, although making that family model the norm for most Americans took decades and then was short-lived.

### **Middle-Class America: Realities, Myths, and Transitions**

The road to middle-class America and the breadwinner-homemaker family ideal was a bumpy one, often interrupted by the vagaries of the capitalist market and the onset of wars and exclusive of large segments of the population. The most notable economic challenge was the Great Depression of the 1930s, which resulted in widespread job loss and poverty, delayed marriages, and the entry of many women into the labor market. The causes of the Great Depression are still debated—the over-extension of credit, stock market and real estate speculation—but the consequences were clear: Between 1929 and 1933, businesses failed, fortunes were lost, real wages declined by at least one-third, unemployment increased, and 45–63 percent of the population lived in poverty (Ryscavage 2009:90–92). The economic decline curtailed marriage and fertility rates and drew more women into the labor market, fostering new images of women as more independent and self-sufficient. Elaine Tyler May (1999:35) argues that it resulted in a spate of media images depicting women as spunky, sensual, strong, autonomous, competent, and career oriented. The onset of World War II further increased labor market participation by women; many were drawn into the labor market to replace men who were off at war, and they were applauded as patriotic by the new “Rosie the Riveter” image of womanhood.

The industrial production that occurred during World War II revitalized the U.S. economy due to the demand for workers and products, making it the strongest economy in the world. After the War ended, government intervention, growing rates of education, and the unionization of labor resulted in a blurring of the class line between the working and middle classes and a period of economic growth that was unprecedented in history (Marger 2008). The government offered an expanded array of social welfare benefits,

such as unemployment compensation, and the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (or GI Bill of Rights) offered extensive benefits for veterans, including housing, insurance, and educational benefits. High school completion rates nearly doubled between 1930 and 1950, the number of college degrees attained increased fourfold, and there was a notable expansion of both white-collar and skilled blue-collar jobs (Ryscavage 2009). In 1956, the Interstate Highway Act authorized \$100 billion to cover most of the cost of a 41,000-mile national highway system, thus facilitating the move to the suburbs. New homes, automobiles, and television sets became the norm for many Americans, but as May (1999) explains,

Consumerism in the post-war years went far beyond the mere purchases of goods and services. It included important cultural values, demonstrated success and social mobility, and defined lifestyles. It also provided the most visible symbol of the American way of life: the affluent suburban home. (P. 162)

This post-war affluence made the 1950s the heyday of the modern nuclear family, a family ideal that spread well beyond national borders in its influence. Because the United States had become the world's hegemonic society, sociologists primarily studied American families and saw them as a model for other societies (Wallerstein 2004). The modern nuclear family came to epitomize economically successful family life and the fruits of capitalism, and even those left out of the economic bounty were seen as holding values that would soon enable them to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle. For example, a family textbook written by Andrew G. Truxal and Francis E. Merrill and published in 1947 overtly and repeatedly compares the American family favorably with other families. Although they acknowledged economic disparities, they asserted that American families ("excluding Negroes") were middle-class families because they held the same values, defined themselves as middle class, and were rapidly transitioning into that class (pp. 23–25). The authors make clear the connection between capitalism and the creation of successful families by noting that Americans are as capitalistic in their family affairs as in business, leading to an "all-pervasive individualism and emancipation from traditional dictates and familial domination" (p. 79). Finally, while evading the issue of gender equality in marriage, they contended that modernity had elevated the social status of women, making it necessary for men to offer women quite a bit to marry them and "willingly submit to economic subordination" (p. 174).

The United States dominated the world economy in the three decades following World War II, controlling two-thirds of its industrial capacity and 75 percent of its invested capital (Perrucci and Wysong 2007). Although the

growing prosperity of Americans in the post-war era has been widely documented, it was not shared by all segments of the population. By the early 1960s, among those who were employed, nearly 80 percent of African American men and 49 percent of white men held blue-collar or working-class jobs (Komarovsky 1962), quite in contrast to popular images of white-collar, suburban families. The poverty rate among African Americans in the late 1950s was more than 50 percent and taking a devastating toll on families. After centuries of slavery and family separation, many black families had been further destabilized by northward migration, joblessness, and a growing trend toward non-marital childbearing and single motherhood. But poverty was not confined to African Americans: In *The Other America*, Michael Harrington (1962) unveiled the existence of more than 30 million people who lived in poverty in the United States—the wealthiest nation on earth. Harrington characterized this poverty as intergenerational in nature and as producing a distinct culture of poverty. This work played a central role in creating the antipoverty programs during the mid-1960s, which tried to alleviate poverty through the creation of jobs and job training. The era marked a high point of idealism among Americans, as millions embraced the notion that poverty would be eliminated. But within a decade, there was a political backlash against government intervention on behalf of the poor and other marginalized groups, intensified by the growing threat to the middle class caused by the rise of the global economy, declining corporate profits, and the transition from an industrial to an information and services economy.

## The Post-Industrial Economy and Growing Class Inequality

The rise of the post-industrial, or information and services, economy initially led to a decline in corporate profits in dominant countries like the United States and Britain. This economic decline was met with the emergence of conservative political and economic revolutions in both nations that focused on shrinking the state, cutting social welfare programs, and reviving the capitalist economy (Irwin 2008). These ideals are part of a neoliberal ideology that essentially supports freeing capitalism and individual entrepreneurs from governmental control and restrictions and supporting free markets, free trade, and individual property rights (Harvey 2005). The results have been economic policies and tax structures that redistribute wealth to the wealthy, enable corporations to curtail or cancel fringe benefits for employees, undermine unions, and subsidize companies that transfer jobs abroad

(Bartlett and Steele 1992). Such policies were seen as restoring dynamism to capitalism; for example, the U.S. share of profits in the financial sector rose from 14 percent in 1981 to nearly 40 percent at the turn of the twenty-first century (Irwin 2008).

Few Americans, however, have shared in the economic fortunes of corporations. Instead, the economic transition has displaced millions of workers, starting with those in blue-collar and less skilled positions. As Perrucci and Wysong (2007) explain, more than 11 million American workers lost their jobs between 1978 and 1986 due to plant shutdowns, relocations, and layoffs, and massive layoffs continued through the early years of the twenty-first century. This restructuring began with the loss of blue-collar jobs in the manufacturing sector and expanded to include the downsizing of the white-collar and managerial sector of the labor market, with corporate mergers, buyouts, and the rise of multinational corporations intent on maximizing profits by investing abroad. At the same time, the pay and fortunes of CEOs and corporate executives skyrocketed during the 1980s and 1990s, as did corporate profits. Perrucci and Wysong present the radical argument that the American middle class no longer exists, as the concept of “middle class” suggests a stable, secure job with adequate resources and benefits (p. 38).

Although opinions may vary on whether there is a stable or viable middle class, there is little dispute over the fact that the middle class has declined, social inequality and class polarization have intensified, and more people have joined the ranks of the working poor. The post-industrial economy has resulted in more social inequality in developed nations; for example, in the United Kingdom, the richest 20 percent of the population earned four times as much as the poorest 20 percent in 1977 but seven times as much by 1991 (Atkinson 2005:54). All developed nations have seen growing class polarization, with the highest levels of social inequality among developed nations found in the United States. Between 1979 and 1997, after-tax income declined for the lowest 20 percent of households, increased just 5 percent in the middle, and grew more than 250 percent for the top 1 percent of earners (Atkinson 2005). There is also evidence that class awareness is increasing among Americans; for example, a majority are concerned about the possibility of losing their jobs and believe that the American Dream has become more difficult to achieve (Perrucci and Wysong 2007). By the 1970s, this had led to renewed debates over class and class theory, which is the topic of Chapter 2.