SOCIAL INEQUALITY

IN A GLOBAL AGE

SIXTH EDITION

SCOTT SERNAU

Social Inequality in a Global Age

Sixth Edition

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Preface

Social stratification and inequality have remained at the core of sociological thinking from the classical theorists on through the work of current scholars, who are demonstrating new interest in issues of race, class, and gender. Yet the concept of stratification itself can be a challenging one to teach and to study. Students are often more interested in learning about the particular aspects of inequality that they see affecting themselves than they are in examining the whole structure of social inequality. Students who have never been encouraged to think of their own experiences in terms of social class and social structure may approach the whole topic with apathy. This is not to blame students—the failure to think in terms of class is a problem deeply rooted in our society. Students may also face a course on social stratification with a certain dread: Those who are math-phobic may worry about too many statistics, and those from relatively privileged backgrounds may worry that they will be the subject of finger-pointing by "radical" professors. Although I have always tried to connect the course I teach about inequality to the lived experiences of my students and their communities, I admit that I have probably also assigned readings that have often contributed to both apathy and angst on the part of students.

At the same time that I've been teaching courses on inequality over the past three decades, I have also had the privilege of editing the American Sociological Association's syllabus and instructional materials collection for inequality and stratification, and I have organized workshops on teaching courses in this subject matter at the annual meetings of various professional societies. In attending these workshops, I have realized that although instructors are often passionate about the topic, they have their own angst in teaching it. They want students to understand the foundations of classical theory in a way that actually illuminates their current studies; they don't want students to see those foundations as just the work of "old, dead Germans." Instructors want to incorporate exciting new material on race, class, and gender while still giving students a solid grounding in the core concepts. They are often eager to include material on the globalized economy while still helping students understand changes in their own communities. And above all, they are struggling to find ways to help students see the relevance—even the urgency—of this material to the society we are currently making and remaking. Their plea has been for materials that are organized but not pat, hard-hitting but not preachy; they are looking for ways to help students both care deeply and think deeply about the topic.

This book is an effort to answer that plea. The language and the examples I use here are straight from current headlines and everyday experience—straightforward without oversimplifying difficult issues. The classical theorists get their say, not just in a perfunctory overview at the beginning but throughout the entire book, as their ideas give foundation to current topics. At the same time, discussion of the divides of race and gender is not just appended to the chapters but integrated into the analysis and the narrative so that students can begin to grasp how differing dimensions of inequality interrelate. Likewise, the theme of global

change and the globalization of our times is integral to each chapter. Rather than tack some comparative material onto the end of each chapter, I place the U.S. experience in a global context throughout. In my teaching, I have found that the way to help students see the relevance and importance of global material is to link it directly to their own lived experience, and I have brought that approach to this book.

This is not a book by committee, and I have not tried to make it sound like one. I occasionally relate personal experiences (they are, as one speaker noted, the only kind I have) and close-to-home examples. My hope is that students in turn will be able to relate the material to their own lives and communities and the changes they are witnessing in both.

The first three chapters explore the background to a sociological study of inequality. Chapter 1 gives expanded attention to the intersection of race, class, and gender—along with the related dimensions of age, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion—as a way to provoke thoughtful reflection on how these are intertwined in our social world. It presents students with a challenge to think systematically, maybe for the first time, about how social inequalities of class, race, and gender have affected who they are and what Max Weber would have called their life chances. The next two chapters explore the fervent debate that has swirled around the topic of inequality since the very first civilizations and the emerging global economy that provides the context for understanding a society's struggles with poverty and inequality. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore how class, race, and gender divide U.S. and global social structure. These three chapters are followed by two that round out Max Weber's analysis of the dimensions of inequality: Chapter 7 addresses prestige and lifestyle, and Chapter 8 discusses political power. These chapters bring the ideas of Weber, Thorstein Veblen, and C. Wright Mills to life with current examples of changing lifestyles and patterns of consumption as well as debates about such things as campaign finance reform. The chapters in Part III look at the challenges posed by inequality: education and mobility, poverty and place, public policy, and the role of social movements. These chapters examine the classic studies of mobility but also the current debates on educational reform; the realities of urban, suburban, and rural poverty; the challenges of public policy, from the New Deal to welfare reform and beyond; and the struggles of both old and new social movements. The final chapter, on the globalization of race, class, and gender, is both a call to understanding—linking the labor movement, the women's movement, and the civil rights movement just as previous chapters linked class, gender, and race—and a call to action. It describes new movements whose successes show that despite real societal constraints, positive action toward a more just society is possible.

The combination of critical thinking and personal involvement is carried into the "Making Connections" and "Making a Difference" resources and activities at the end of each chapter. These provide students with links to reliable sources of further information through both the world and the World Wide Web. They also offer students options for exploring the topics discussed in the chapters in more detail, applying concepts to their own experiences, backgrounds, and local communities. These wide-ranging exercises amplify the local–global connections made in the book and give students and instructors the opportunity to deepen and extend the learning process. The message throughout this volume is that although there are no

easy answers, we must not assume that there are no answers. Rather, we must accept the challenge to move on to deeper understandings and to new and better questions. My hope is that every reader finds here a challenge to move from apathy and angst to analysis and action.

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- **Tables and Figures** are available in an easily downloadable format for use in papers, handouts, and presentations.
- Carefully selected **web links** for each chapter are provided to enhance classroom-based explorations of key topics.

Acknowledgments

Books are always a collaborative effort, and the SAGE team has been both highly professional and highly supportive. I have worked with Jeff Lasser, publisher, on various projects over the years and always appreciated his thoughtful guidance. Steve Rutter and Jerry Westby helped craft this project in its early stages, and Ben Penner and David Repetto provided insights, enthusiasm, and encouragement for later editions. It has been a pleasure to work with a publisher who not only understands "market forces" but also truly grasps social forces and the important social justice issues of our day. This is a rarity, and I have enjoyed the collaboration. Jane Haenel, production editor, cheerfully and efficiently organized everything, including last-minute updates, into a coherent whole. Pei-Chun Lee was a wonderful research assistant who collected and updated data. Amy Harris repaired my problematic prose and carefully checked sources. The book is also enriched by a collaboration with two talented young photographers, Catherine Alley and Elena Grupp, who provided photo essays set in rural Honduras, the Navajo reservation of Arizona, and the old industrial corridor of South Bend, Indiana. Their eye for the challenges and harsh realities as well as the beauty and cultural richness of struggling places is a wonderful complement to the message of the text.

Books such as this live and die at the hand of reviewers, and I've been fortunate to have some of the best. Thanks go to those who read the early drafts of the first chapters, as well as each succeeding edition. Their insights helped build this into a much stronger book.

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Their resounding enthusiasm for the book and its contributions kept me writing, while at the same time their painstaking critiques of the chapters kept me honest and constantly refining the material. The book's final form owes a great deal to their suggestions because I reorganized some of the chapters to present the material with maximum clarity as well as to highlight important issues concerning race and gender, global economic change, and social movements.

PART

I

Roots of Inequality

CHAPTER

1 The Gordian Knot of Race, Class, and Gender

When Alexander the Great brought his armies across Asia Minor, he was reportedly shown the Gordian knot, an intricate, tightly bound tangle of cords tied by Gordius, king of Phrygia. It was said that only the future ruler of all Asia would be capable of untying the knot. The story recounts that a frustrated Alexander finally sliced the knot open with his sword.

There are many dimensions to inequality, and all of these dimensions are interrelated. **Class, race**, and **gender** are three of inequality's core dimensions. Asking which of them is most important may be like asking, Which matters more in the making of a box: height, length, or width? These dimensions are like the 9 to 11 dimensions that quantum physics imagines for our universe: tangled, intertwined, some hard to see, others hard to measure, but all affecting the makeup of the whole. We could note other dimensions as well. Age, for example, can provide both advantage and disadvantage, privileges and problems. We stereotype both ends of the age spectrum: "silly teenagers" who talk, dress, and act funny, and "silly old codgers" who talk, dress, and act funny. Age is unlike class, race, or gender, however, in that unless our lives are cut short, we all move through all age categories. Sexuality and sexual orientation also constitute a complex dimension. Debates over gay marriage and who qualifies as a partner for the purposes of health care, tax, and housing benefits highlight how sexuality can be a dimension of privilege or disadvantage. Stereotypes, discrimination, and vulnerability to violence are also bound up in the sexuality dimension. Some dimensions, such as race, **ethnicity**, and religion, are frequently so bound together that they are hard to disentangle. In this chapter, we explore some of the dimensions of inequality. We can't completely untangle this knot in our social fabric, but we can at least slice into it.

Dimensions of an Unequal World

Inequality is at the core of sociology and its analysis of society. It is also at the core of your daily life experience, although you may not realize it. You may know you are broke. You may wish you were rich. You may be angry about the time you felt rebuffed as a black woman—or as a white man. You may have a sense that some people's lives have been a lot easier than yours—or that some have had a much harder time. In the United States in particular, and in most of the world in general, we are continually affected by social inequalities, yet we are rarely encouraged to think in those terms.

We know that many people are poor, but why are they poor? Perhaps they are just lazy. That's certainly possible—I have met some very lazy people. But come to think of it, not all of them are poor! If you have ever worked for a "lazy" supervisor or dealt with a "lazy" professional (not among your professors, I hope!), you know that it's possible for some people to be less than diligent and still command positions of authority and high salaries. Perhaps the poor are just unlucky. It is certain that luck matters a great deal in our society. You may know of people who have had "bad luck": They've lost their jobs or are in fear of losing long-held positions, just because their companies are closing or moving. Yet when we step back to look at the numbers, we find there are a great many of these "unlucky" individuals out there, all with similar stories. Patterns that go beyond individual misfortune are clearly at work.

You may also know people who "have it made" and wonder how they got to where they are. If you ask them, most will decline to claim special talents or brilliance; instead, they're likely to say something about diligence and hard work. Hard work certainly can't hurt anyone seeking success. But then again, I know of a woman who works 12-hour days doing the back-breaking work of picking vegetables and then goes home to care for three tired and hungry children. She works hard, but she does not seem to be climbing the ladder of success. Having access to the right schools, financial resources, business and professional contacts, and particular opportunities seems to play a large role in turning hard work into hard cash. The sociological study of social inequality does not negate individual differences and efforts, but it seeks to examine patterns that go beyond individual cases, to explore differences in access and opportunity and the constraints that shape people's choices.

Sociologists are interested not only in the fact of inequality but also in how this inequality is structured. When geologists are trying to understand the structure of rock formations, they look for strata: layers with discernible borders between the levels. Sociologists look for social stratification—that is, how the inequalities in a society are sorted into identifiable layers of persons with common characteristics. Those layers are social classes. Although scholars have examined the structure of social classes since the mid-19th century, most of us rarely think in class terms. Particularly in the United States (as well as in some other countries, such as Canada and Australia), the cultural emphasis has been on the equal standing of all members of society; Americans are generally reluctant to use the language of class beyond vague and all-encompassing allusions to being "middle class." The term ***middle class*** once referred quite specifically to that group that stood in the middle ground between the common working classes and the wealthy propertied classes. Today, a wide range of people willingly claim middle-class status, for it seems uppity to label oneself ***upper class***, and almost no one wants to admit to being lower class, which sounds like an admission of personal failings.

Certainly, a simple division of American society into distinct social classes is not easy, and the difficulty is compounded by inequalities that come with gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and age. Yet if we look even casually at various neighborhoods, we can easily see that we are looking at clusters of very different lifestyles. We can see class distinctions in the houses and the

cars and also in the residents' attitudes and routines, as well as in their preferences or tastes in everything from yard decor to Christmas lights. In many ways, members of different classes live in different, and divided, worlds.

We may be most resistant to the language of social inequality and social class when it comes to the area of our past accomplishments and future aspirations. Certainly, we are where we are, in this place in life, in this university, with a particular set of prospects, because of our own abilities and hard work. The message of sociologists that our life chances (what we can hope for from our lives) and our mobility (whether we move up or down in a stratified system) are both socially conditioned and socially constrained is not likely to be a popular one—at least not until we have to explain why we failed that entrance exam or didn't get that job! We may be sensitive to personal bias ("That person was against me because of my age [or race, or gender, or clothes, or whatever]"), but most of us overlook the way the entire structure of our social system shapes our opportunities.

Let me illustrate with an example from my own experience and background. I am a sociology professor at a midsize public university in the Midwest. I have an occupational title and educational credentials that place me near the upper end of job prestige rankings—at least I get called "Dr." by my students and by telemarketers. I earn a salary that places me somewhat above the overall national average (although somewhat below the average for persons of my age, gender, and race). My social class background doesn't differ greatly from that of many of my students. My grandfather was the son of German immigrants who farmed a bit and ran a small "saloon." He did various odd jobs before marriage, and then, he helped run his wife's parents' struggling farm. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, he worked as a night watchman in Chicago until he was injured in a fall, and then, he drove a cab before returning to central Wisconsin to work in a paper mill and do some minor truck farming. When asked about his life, he would talk about hard work, about good times and hard times, about luck and perseverance and getting by. He was right about all this, of course. Yet his life was shaped in innumerable ways by his social class, as well as by his ethnicity, and these were constantly interacting with broader social and economic changes. Had his own parents been wealthier, they could have bought richer farmland where they began in Indiana rather than moving on to marginal land in central Wisconsin, and their "luck" at farming might have proven much better. Had they been able to afford a better capitalized business than their small saloon, they might have joined a growing circle of prosperous German American small-business owners in Chicago or Milwaukee. And if my grandfather's parents had brought no money at all with them from Germany, they may never have been able to buy land or a business and so would have faced even more difficult times. Had they been African American or Hispanic American, they would not have been accepted in rural central Wisconsin and would more likely have found a home in Gary, Indiana, or south Chicago. As it was, they were part of the great immigrant movement that reshaped this country early in the 20th century and also part of the great movement of people from agriculture into industrial and service economies.

My father grew up amid the difficult times and ethnic antagonisms of Depression-era central Chicago. When his family moved back to central

Wisconsin, he helped on the farm and went to work in the paper mill. When he found he hated mill work, he tried bartending. Finally, he studied for a real estate license and subsequently sold new homes for many years in north suburban Milwaukee, prospering slightly during the growth years of the 1950s and 1960s and facing lean times during the recession years and slow growth of much of the Midwest that followed in the 1970s. When asked about his life, he, too, spoke of work that he liked and hated, of good times and hard times, and of hard work and perseverance. He did not speak of the real estate license as his precarious step into a growing middle class, or of his being part of a generational movement from blue-collar industry into the white-collar service sector, or of social forces such as suburbanization and the flight of industry and jobs from the Midwest and Northeast, yet his opportunities and life chances were very much influenced by these events.

As for myself, truly dismal performances in door-to-door sales and in junior high school "shop" classes convinced me early on that I was suited for neither sales nor industry. I excelled at school, especially in courses involving writing or science. A move during my fourth-grade year from an increasingly troubled urban elementary school to a substantially more rigorous and well-equipped middle-class suburban school system helped me develop these interests. I worked odd jobs during high school to earn enough money to pay for 3 years at a small public university at a time when in-state tuition was quite reasonable. With very high SAT scores (I excel at the abstract and impractical), I had many offers from other colleges and universities, but I didn't believe I could afford any of them—I had neither the savings nor the savvy needed to pursue scholarships and financial aid. My father and my grandmother contributed a bit, and my flair for testing out of courses got me an undergraduate degree in the 3 years of college I could afford. The downside of this rush was that I graduated into an economic recession, and there was little new hiring going on. My penchant for academics suggested graduate school as a likely course. An early interest in law and politics had shifted to social science and social policy, so eventually, I landed at a large Ivy League university and emerged with a PhD in sociology.

Certainly, my experience—neither especially privileged nor especially deprived—would seem to be the result of my individual motivations and abilities. The fact that I'm not rich is explained by my choice of profession. Both the fact that I was the first in my family to obtain a college degree and the fact that I have a secure white-collar position (although I actually wear far fewer white collars than my father did) are explained by my own individual set of abilities and hard work. My students who come from working-class origins strongly argue the same, and few would ever admit privilege. But note how my experience might have been different.

What if my family had been wealthy? What if my father's failed attempt to start his own business had succeeded and he had ridden a suburban building boom to great prosperity as a real estate developer? Others with a bit more investment capital and better timing had done just that. We would have lived in one of the wealthier suburbs across the river. I would still have attended a public high school, but it would have been one with exceptional facilities and programs. In place of the odd jobs I worked, I would have indulged my interest in tennis—I'm not very good, but with early private instruction, I may well have been able to make my high school's

tennis team. In a school where virtually every student was college bound, I would have received very good guidance counseling and would have carefully gone through the many brochures that I received for selective liberal arts colleges with beautiful buildings and beautiful female students on the cover. With the assurance that I could afford to attend these schools (I had the test scores to get in), I might have welcomed my guidance counselor's advice in choosing the best (I would have needed this advice, given that this scenario still assumes I did not have college-educated parents to help steer my decisions). My parents, my peers, and my counselor would likely have strongly encouraged my interest in law. Only with a high-income profession could I hope to return to live in the same exclusive suburban area with my friends and classmates. A private law practice would still allow me to work with and consult for my father's business. Alternatively, I could indulge my interests in geography and urban studies as an undergraduate, then pursue a graduate business degree, and then combine these interests as I eventually took over that business. Certainly, ambling excursions into the social sciences would have been discouraged. Some of my individual tastes and abilities would still be there, although now honed and shaped in new directions by my social situation. I might still enjoy history and social science and writing, but I might be spending evenings in the study of my large suburban home, writing something such as *The Seven Business Secrets of Benjamin Franklin.*

On the other hand, what if my family had been poor? Our important move from the city to the suburbs when I was 9 years old would never have taken place. I would instead have attended an urban high school in north-central Milwaukee that suffered through a decade of declining facilities and neighborhoods, mounting racial tension, and a growing drug problem. I probably still would have graduated and might still have aspired to college, but I would have had to work out attending occasional classes at the nearby university while attempting to work and contribute to the family income. Some early difficulties I had with math would likely have gone uncorrected, limiting my academic options. If I had managed to graduate from college, it would not have been in 3 years but in 6 or 7, and I don't know if I would have had the energy or enthusiasm to consider graduate school.

Consider an even thornier question: What if my family had been black? My father might well have still made his way to Milwaukee from Chicago, but he probably would never have left industrial work. He could not have left to tend bar in the late 1940s unless he was willing to work in an all-black club. He could not have gone into selling suburban new construction, as that was an all-white domain right through the 1970s. Black would-be homebuyers were systematically excluded by their limited financial resources, banks, and fearful white suburbanites, and there was no place for a black real estate agent in suburban Milwaukee. My father would likely have continued to work at one or more of the factories on the west side of the city, many of which closed or laid off workers in the industrial downturn of the 1970s and 1980s. This would have occurred just as I was reaching crucial high school and college years. I would have faced all the hurdles of the "poor" scenario; plus the school counselors of the time might not have strongly encouraged me to pursue college.

Finally, what if I had been a woman? This may be the hardest scenario of all to unpack, for gender assumptions and inequalities are so thoroughly built into our families, our peer interactions, the media, and institutions such as schools that they are nearly impossible to disentangle from personal characteristics. My difficulties in math—which stemmed from the move from an urban to a suburban school that was a full year ahead, so that I virtually skipped long division and fractions—would likely have been attributed to my gender and not to the move. My high school counselors would not have pushed me to overcome the deficiencies, and although I still would have easily graduated from high school, my SAT and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores would have been much lower, dragged down by poor math performance. With lower scores, I would have had fewer choices regarding colleges and may not have gotten into a top graduate school. I may have benefited from being a woman in one area: the odd jobs I worked on and off during college. The temporary agencies I worked for automatically assigned female applicants to clerical positions, which were cleaner and paid just a bit more than the "light industrial" work that males were assigned. Even though I type far faster than I pack boxes, I never got a clerical position until finally the federal student loan office needed an office worker who could lift heavy boxes full of loan applications and files and so decided to hire a young man. Of course, in today's economy, I would have to market my computer skills—searching those student loan databases—rather than just a strong back.

But if I had been a woman, other challenges would have been waiting down the road. Our first child was born while I was in graduate school, and my wife was able to take a short amount of maternity leave from work. Had that been my husband instead, he could not have taken off for "paternity" leave, and I would have had to delay completion of my graduate program, as I would have had to take on a greater portion of the child care than I did. Career success following graduation (assuming I got there) is also a complex question. Sociology is a field rapidly opening to women, and depending on where I went, I might have done quite well as a female sociologist. Had I chosen the legal profession, I may also have done well, but as a woman, I would have expected to earn less than 70% of what male law school graduates earn over the course of my career.

A key theme of sociology is that who we become is the result of a complex interplay between individual characteristics and our place in society, which determines which of our characteristics are encouraged, rewarded, and constrained. The fact that these rewards and constraints are so unequally distributed makes the topic of social inequality at times very disturbing but also intensely interesting. In a now famous turn of phrase, C. Wright Mills (1959) referred to our ability to connect our personal biographies to the broader sweep of history and society and to see the connections between personal troubles and social conditions as the **sociological imagination**. I hope you won't read the chapters that follow passively, but instead try to engage and develop your sociological imagination, actively making connections between personal experiences—your own as well as those of people you know—and the stratified social structures that advance or hinder our hopes, plans, and possibilities.

Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender in the United States

Where you stand in Robeson County depends on who you are, who your family is, and to what group you belong (LeDuff, 2001). The county courthouse even lists veterans in a hierarchy: Caucasians first, then Lumbee Indians, then African Americans. Where you stand at Smithfield Packing, the largest hog-butchering and pork production plant in the world, located nearby, also depends on who you are. White men hold supervisory roles. Most of the other white men at the plant are mechanics. A couple of Caucasian men and the Lumbee Indians make boxes. A few Lumbee Indians are supervisors or have other "clean" jobs. Given that most of the local businesses are owned by Caucasians or Native Americans, members of these groups may have other job options. Almost all of the newly hired black women go to the "chitterlings" room to scrape feces and worms from the hogs' intestines. Hardly elegant, but it is "sit-down work." The African American men and most of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans, both men and women, go to the butchering floor. There they stand for 8.5 hours at a stretch, slashing at hog carcasses with sharp knives, trying to get all the meat from the bone and to turn out the required 32,000 pork shoulders per shift at a rate of 17 seconds per hog per worker. At the end of a shift, their backs ache, their wrists ache, their hands are numb. Some say this giant plant doesn't kill just pigs—it kills the hearts, minds, and bodies of the workers. But this is the only job for miles in any direction that pays "unskilled workers" as much as $8 an hour.

Profits at this plant have grown, while wages have remained stagnant. The management is vigorously antiunion and has been accused of assigning workers to their stations based on race and gender. Yet the plant remains able to get workers, although with difficulty: Some come on release from the local prison, some are recruited from New York's immigrant communities, and some come because they've heard by word of mouth, in Mexico and beyond, that jobs are available. By far, most of the newcomers are Mexicans and Mexican Americans—some in the United States legally, some with forged papers and huge debts owed to "coyotes" who slipped them across the border. The work on the plant floor is so hard that employee turnover is virtually 100%—5,000 leave in a year and 5,000 come. Increasingly, those who come are Hispanic. LeDuff notes that African Americans in Robeson County had long hoped that their position in the plant and in the community would improve, but they now find it stagnating; they are as poor as ever. They tend not to blame the plant's management or the town leadership for this situation; rather, they blame "the Mexicans" for taking their jobs and lowering their wages.

At the end of a day, the workers pop pain pills, swab cuts with antiseptic, and make the long drive to trailers, cinder block houses, and wooden shacks in segregated communities: Caucasians to Lumberton, African Americans to Fayetteville, Native Americans to Pembroke, Mexicans to Red Springs. There are four taverns along the way, one for each racial group. Sometimes, the men stop at these; most of the women, African American and Mexican, must hurry home to waiting children. The surrounding counties are all poor,

offering few job options. The textile mills that used to hire many locals, especially white and black women, are now gone—many to Mexico. Meanwhile, the hog-butchering business arrived, leaving union towns, such as Chicago and Omaha with their $18-an-hour wages, and finding a home here, the new "hog butcher for the world" (to borrow Carl Sandburg's famous but now out-of-date line about Chicago). What remains in Chicago is the board of trade, where pork belly futures are traded at electronic speeds.

Other food production has also come south. You don't need "big shoulders" (another Sandburg description of Chicago) to butcher chicken and filet catfish, and these jobs are heavily feminized as well as racially divided:

> The catfish are trucked from the fish farms to the factory where they await the assembly line. The workers—also women, also black, also poor—are ready for them in their waders, looking like a female angler's society. But these women mean business. The fish come down the line, slippery and flopping. The sawyer grabs the fish and lops off their heads with a band saw, tossing the bodies back onto the line while the heads drop into a bucket. Down the line, women with razor-sharp filet knives make several deft cuts to eviscerate the fish and turn them into filets to be frozen. Many of the longer-term workers have lost fingers, especially to the saws. The company says they fail to follow directions and that they get careless. The women say they are overworked. They say they get tired. They say they slip in the fish guts that fill the floor. But through it all, the assembly line, like Paul Robeson's Ol' Man River, "just keeps rolling along." The line that threads between these rows of black women is operated by a tall white man who supervises from a raised control booth, adjusting the speed of the line and noting the workers' efforts. One watches and wonders: is this the face of the new South or the old South? And what of what Marx called the "social relations of production"; is this the assembly line of the future or the plantation of the past under a metal roof? (Sernau, 2000, p. 88)

These are stories about work and about food. They're also about the **industrialization** of food production and about immigration and globalization, as well as the decline of union power. But in the day-to-day exchanges and experiences of these workers, they are also stories about race, class, ethnicity, and gender and about how these dimensions intersect in the world of work. They are stories of poverty and inequality but also stories about the complex social relations that define the stratification system.

Sociologists trying to make sense of the complexities of social inequality have turned to the increasingly popular analytic triad of race, class, and gender. Contributors to popular anthologies and new organizations try to untangle the complex ways in which these three dimensions define inequality in U.S. society and the world. Other dimensions could be added: religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. This is the "new" approach to social inequality, not in that any of these are new forms of inequality, but in that early "classical" theorists gave much less attention to race and gender than to class. They occasionally considered religion and nationality, but they paid scant attention to age

or sexuality. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contended that the first class division may have come along lines of gender and age as men began to treat women and children as their personal property (see McLellan, 1977). Men became the first dominant group and women the first subordinate group. Following from this, Marx and Engels developed biting critiques of middle-class ("bourgeois") family structure that in many ways anticipated feminist critiques. They were writing *The Communist Manifesto* just as the first American feminists were denouncing "domestic slavery" at a conference in Seneca Falls, New York. Marx also offered interesting observations on how capitalists could use racial divisions to keep members of the working class divided, especially in the United States. Yet both race and gender were clearly in the background in his analysis.

In describing the dimensions of stratification, Max Weber proposed a three-part division: class, status (prestige), and party (political power). He was interested in the organization of privilege and duty between men and women within the household and was particularly interested in cultural and religious differences, but as they were for Marx, race and gender were secondary to his analysis.

One way to look at both race and gender, as well as the other dimensions of inequality, is as special types of status. Although many people have tried to define and describe clear racial categories, such attempts have continually foundered on the complexity and diversity of human backgrounds. Race is better understood as a social status. A racial identity or category can confer special prestige or respect within a community and may confer particular stigma and disadvantage—apart from, or at least in addition to, class position—in hostile communities. Gender is likewise a particular form of social and legal status that may confer privileges or barriers in addition to those of class. A wealthy woman may experience expectations and opportunities that are different from those experienced by a wealthy man, and a poor woman's experience of poverty and the prospects for upward mobility may be quite different from that of a poor man. Age may command respect or contempt, depending on the context, and ethnic heritage may be a source of pride or something to be hidden. Race and gender are also closely bound up in struggles for power. Those in power may use issues of race to attempt to divide groups that pose a threat to their power, or race may become a rallying cry for groups attempting to mobilize and challenge established power.

The difficulty in trying to analyze race, class, and gender lies in the fact that the three are in continual and complex interaction with one another and with other dimensions of inequality. There is more than just an additive effect; a poor black woman, for example, faces more than simply double or even triple disadvantage. Poor black women may be less likely than poor black men to be unemployed, with more starting-level positions available to them, but these women often also face the added burden of heavy family responsibilities. Compared with poor African Americans or Latinos, poor Caucasians, male or female, may face less discrimination in some areas (such as housing) as they seek to move out of poverty, but they may face added shame and stigma that they have somehow personally failed. It is interesting that just as some slurs for poor people of color have faded from polite usage, other slurs—such as the biting and hostile ***trailer trash***—have emerged to stigmatize poor rural and suburban whites.

Race, ethnicity, and gender are social markers that confer identity and social boundaries that define a community and who may be included in or excluded from that community. They are often categories of oppression and privilege, and as such, they must concern us all. Gender is not a "woman's issue" because men must also come to terms with the ways in which their gender may confer power or privilege and may also confer isolation and unrealistic expectations, especially as it interacts with social class. Race is not a "black issue" or a "minority issue" because the members of those disparate groups—now placed together as the "majority"—must also come to terms with identity, boundaries, and perception of "whiteness" and what it can mean in either privilege or stigma, again, as it interacts with social class. The stigmatization of one religion can soon begin to erode freedom of religious expression for others, and violence against gays and lesbians can quickly escalate into violence against anyone whose "differentness" violates someone else's established norms.

We can't hope to disentangle the Gordian knot of race, class, and gender completely, any more than Weber could keep his three dimensions perfectly, analytically separate. Instead, the challenge is to understand more fully the interactions among oppression and privilege, dominant and subordinate positions, and inclusion and exclusion that shape our social structure.

The Development of Inequality: Race, Class, and Gender Across Societies

How did the world get to this state? Was there ever a time when people related as equals? Was there ever a society in which men and women worked as equals and race and class divisions were unknown? Possibly. We must be careful about projecting too many of our hopes onto a utopian past. Yet the glimpses we get of our past, both distant and recent, and of other social arrangements shed interesting light on the development of human societies and the accompanying development of inequality. Evidence suggests that very equal human societies have existed; in fact, such arrangements may once have been the norm. Relative equality, not massive inequality, may be part of our human origins. The story of how we got from such a place to the world we now know is not as long as you might think, and it provides a fascinating glimpse into a shared past.

Hunting and Gathering Societies

Until about 10,000 years ago, **hunting and gathering societies** contained everyone in the world. These societies were largely made up of seminomadic bands of about 50, although in lush environments some could have been larger, and the bands must have interacted with one another. As a rule, hunter-gatherers have gender-divided societies: The men hunt, and the women gather. With their longer legs, men have an advantage in sprinting after game, and their longer arms allow them to throw spears farther. Young women are also likely to have young children, and it's very difficult to chase down your dinner with a 2-year-old in one arm! The gender division

is probably based in social needs as well as in biology, however. To provide food, these societies need both tasks—hunting and gathering—to be performed, and they don't collect résumés to fill their two-part division of labor. Because men have certain potential advantages in hunting, it makes sense to train boys to be hunters. Because gathering is also essential, it makes sense to train girls to gather.

The gender division is probably not as clear-cut as it might seem, however. Men who are out hunting often gather wild honey, birds' eggs, and probably a wide range of edible fruits and nuts. Women who are out gathering might dispatch any small animals they encounter and add them to the larder, and they may also help men stalk and flush game. When fishing is important, men and women probably work together as teams because successfully gathering seafood often combines the skills of both hunting and gathering. More important, however, is that both tasks are essential to the economy of the band. Men's hunting provides important protein and nutrients for the band's diet, but the women's gathering provides the most reliable and abundant food source, often between 60% and 80% of the total. As all hunters know, hunting can be unreliable business, so it's good to have more reliable staples on which to depend. Because the tasks that both men and women perform are essential to the vitality of the hunter-gatherer economy, both men and women have power bases within such societies.

Class divisions are also unheard of among hunter-gatherers. The skills and implements of hunting and gathering are equally available to everyone. Except for a healer or a storyteller or a religious specialist, who might be either male or female, there are few specialized roles. Possessions are few and cannot be hoarded because bands must carry all they possess as they travel. The hunter-gatherer economy is based on **reciprocity,** the sharing of goods. One small group of hunters might be successful one day, whereas others come back empty-handed. As the successful hunters cannot eat the entire rhinoceros themselves, it makes sense for them to share their take, with the knowledge that the next time they might be on the receiving end.

In hunting and gathering societies, power resides primarily in the consensus of the group, although a few leaders might emerge, based on their personal charisma or ability to command respect. Age can cut both ways: Elders may be accorded added respect for their acquired knowledge of plants, seasons, stories, or incantations, but an older member's declining eyesight might require giving leadership of the hunt to someone younger. Prestige may go to the best hunter or the best storyteller, but this is not passed down from generation to generation, so there are no prestigious subgroups. Further, in a band in which all must work together for survival, prestige brings few privileges. Hunter-gatherers have little choice but to share their common lot.

Whether hunter-gatherers share a life in which all are poor or all have plenty has been a matter of debate. Hobbes wrote that life before civilization was "nasty, brutish, and short." This has often described our cartoon image of the "caveman," who is nasty, brutish, and short and lives just such a life. In fact, we have evidence that the men and women of hunting and gathering bands may live well. They work less than you or I do, maybe only about 20 hours per week (Sahlins, 1972). In part, this is because there is only so much they can do. Their lives are tied to the rhythms of nature, so they must

wait for the returning herds or the ripening fruits. While they wait, they joke and tell stories, they mend their simple tools and temporary dwellings, they play with their children, and, it seems, they often give some energy to flirting and lovemaking. Their diets are often healthier than those of most of the world's peasants; in fact, they are quite similar to the diverse, high-fiber, organic diets based on fresh fruits and vegetables supplemented with a little lean meat that nutritionists encourage for the rest of us.

If hunter-gatherers live so well, why are there now so few of them? The first hunter-gatherers to become cultivators may have done so out of necessity when they were faced with growing populations and declining environmental abundance, whether caused by natural climate change or their own predations. Many others have succumbed to larger, more aggressive societies that needed their land and resources. This is a process that continues through the present day, so the last true hunter-gatherers are close to their final hunt.

Horticultural and Herding Societies

Women in hunting and gathering societies know a great deal about the plants they harvest. Under pressure to provide for their bands, some may have begun to remove unwanted plants, to move and tend root crops, and eventually to place seeds in fertile ground intentionally. They became plant cultivators, or horticulturalists. **Horticultural societies** differ from hunter-gatherer societies in several key ways. They often must shift their cultivation, but they may stay in one place when they do so, such as in a village in the middle of shifting gardens. They also can produce economic surpluses and store them, thus creating commodities. In addition, a population that lives in one location grows. When a village reaches the size of several hundred inhabitants, simple reciprocity often gives way to **redistribution,** with redistributors who may become "big men" by gathering and giving gifts. Some of these societies have female traders and "big women," but key positions of political and economic power are often monopolized by men.

Still, the horticultural surplus produced by a small village is likely to be limited and perishable, so there is little hoarding and little intergenerational accumulation. The big man's power is based largely on his own charisma and influence; he has little coercive power. His privileges are based on his ability to redistribute goods to everyone's satisfaction and to his own advantage. And his prestige is based largely on his ability to reward supporters generously.

Even if the top leaders are most often men, women often play a key role in the social organization and governance of horticultural societies because they are the gardeners. Men may do the "ax work" of clearing the land, but it is often the women who do the "hoe work" of tending the gardens. Men may supplement the food supply by hunting and fishing, but it is the women's gardens that sustain the village. The rule that he or she who controls the economy also controls much of the governance again seems to apply. Economic power leads to social and political power—a lesson not lost on feminist activists in modern industrial societies as well. Among the Iroquois, an Eastern Woodland group of horticulturalists who lived in what is now the U.S. Northeast, the men were the tribal leaders who met in

council, but the women were the electors who chose those leaders. Further, it was elder women who controlled the longhouses and the clan structure; when a man married, he went to live with his wife's relatives. Horticultural societies in the Pacific region often trace descent and lineage through the women's rather than the men's ancestry, and behind every male leader there are well-connected and often influential women.

Age often brings respect in horticultural societies: The village elder, the wise "medicine woman," the vision seeker, the canny clan leader—all had places of particular prestige. These societies' attitudes toward sexuality were often what caught the attention of the first European traders in the Americas, the Pacific region, and parts of Africa. Restrictions on female sexuality were sometimes less stringent than in European society, perhaps because inheritance did not necessarily follow a male line in which men had a prime concern in establishing the "legitimacy" of their offspring. In this atmosphere, alternative sexual orientations were also more likely to be tolerated—in some cases, they were even highly regarded. The Native American ***berdache,*** a person who crossed traditional gender lines, taking on the attributes, and sometimes the marital options, of the opposite sex, is one example of this.

The domestication of plants is one way to cope with scarce food resources; the domestication of animals is another. Rather than just hunting animals, people began to control some animals' movements and eliminate the competition of predators, becoming herders, or pastoralists. Herding societies emerged alongside horticultural societies in arid and semiarid regions that were too dry for horticulture but had grasses on which large herd animals could graze.

Herding societies are often marked by distinct social inequalities. Individuals in such societies can accumulate wealth in the form of herds. Further, they must defend their property. It's not an easy task to swoop down and make off with a horticulturalist's sweet potatoes, but cattle and horses must be guarded. This is generally the job of armed men (women and children are more likely to be given herding responsibilities for smaller animals, such as poultry, sheep, and goats). Given that tending and guarding the herds are male responsibilities, men tend to dominate these societies. In fact, in some herding societies, wealthy men acquire harems of women just as they do herds of horses, cattle, or camels. Men without herds are left to serve as hired hands, often with little prospect for advancement. In some herding societies, this servanthood develops into hereditary slavery.

Age and gender work together as the route to privilege in herding societies: A senior male can become a patriarch, accumulating a vast herd along with the servants to help tend the animals and a large family lineage dependent on him. Still, in a society that produces few luxuries and is constantly on the move, even a patriarch has to be hardy and able to live with hardship and rigors—that is, unless he and his followers take to raiding the luxuries of settled rulers. In a society with strict gender divisions and great importance placed on inheritance of livestock, there also tend to be stricter punishments for those who blur the clear lines of gender or sexuality.

For the past 7,000 years, horticultural and herding societies have been disappearing, giving way, like hunting and gathering societies, to larger and more powerful societal forms. This is a process that began in the Middle East with the rise of agrarian societies at what we have come to call the dawn of civilization.

Agrarian Societies

Agrarian societies, like horticultural societies, are based on cultivation, but they practice intense and continuous cultivation of the land rather than rely on shifting gardens. The term ***horticulture*** comes from the Latin word for garden; ***agriculture*** comes from the Latin word for field. The shift from horticulture to agriculture is largely one of scale. As people domesticated both plants and animals, and as they faced increasing demand to bring more land under cultivation, they realized that oxen could turn up more ground than they could. The keys to agriculture are irrigation and the plow, which allow much more intense cultivation of a given plot of ground. This shift first occurred in the Middle East, which had good candidates for domestication in the horse and the wild ox; good candidates for seed cultivation in the wild grasses, the oats and wheat that blew in the highland; and good opportunities for irrigation in several major river systems. Agriculture provided enough food to support not just villages but whole cities filled with people who were not cultivators themselves. The city, and that urban-based form of social control we call civilization, was born. Again, the order in which things occurred is not entirely clear. Some have suggested that growing food surpluses ***allowed*** for the establishment of cities of priests, artisans, rulers, and their soldiers. A darker view suggests that once ruling groups established themselves, perhaps at key trade and ritual centers, they ***demanded*** more supplies from the countryside and forced the intensification of work and production that became agriculture.

In either case, agrarian societies became vastly more stratified than their predecessors. As the cultivation process shifted from groups of women to men, or to families led by men who worked with the animals, women's prominence in society declined. Even more striking was the division of societal members into true and largely fixed classes. Land that was continually under cultivation could be owned, and private property now became very important. A food surplus could support metalworkers and artisans who fashioned lasting items of great value that could be accumulated. The surplus could also support standing armies that gave rulers great coercive power to enforce their demands. Continuously cultivated private property could be passed from father to son, so inheritance became important in maintaining the class structure. As rulers expanded their domains, simple redistribution became difficult, and valuable metals were made into coins to support the first money-based market economies. Land was still the main source of wealth, however, and the way to increase one's privilege, prestige, and power was to bring evermore land under one's control. Rulers could do this with standing armies using metal-edged weapons, and great empires were built.

Increased centralization of power further increased the wealth and power of a few, relative to the bare subsistence-level existence of the many. Those who worked the fields, the new class of peasants, may have produced a surplus, but as the lords who owned or controlled the land laid claim to it, the peasantry were often left with only enough to survive so that they could produce more. The obligations of peasants to their lords were often as high as 50% of their total production. Local landlords and petty rulers could use their command of a region to gain impressive privileges. The rulers of the great empires extracted enough surplus from both the land and subjugated

cities to live in fabulous luxury. The kings and emperors of agrarian empires often commanded absolute power (although often fearing palace coups), ultimate prestige as god-men, and all the privileges that their societies could supply. The Egyptian pharaoh came to be considered a god-man who rightfully owned all the land and all who lived on it to serve him (or, in one case, her) as he pleased. In 12th-century England, the average noble's income was 200 times that of a field hand, and the king's income was 24,000 times that of a field hand. The artisans who worked on the manors and in the cities were often no better off than the peasants, and many agrarian cities were crowded with beggars; these destitute "expendables" may have constituted one tenth to one third of their populations (Lenski, 1966). Yet limited land and a high birthrate meant a steady supply of unskilled labor. When labor was in short supply, warfare could provide not only new land but also slaves or servants.

Agrarian societies also provided opportunities for one other group that was usually kept to the margins. Merchants could travel between cities, using coined money and expensive goods as the medium of exchange. The nobility generally looked down on the merchants, yet there was always the possibility that merchants could amass so much wealth that the largely idle nobles would need them as creditors. As Marx realized, in this odd relationship was one of the contradictions that would destroy the old agrarian systems. Agrarian societies spread from the Middle East across Asia, Europe, and North Africa. For almost 5,000 years, they were the dominant form of human organization: in ancient Babylon and Egypt, in ancient Greece and Rome, and in medieval Europe, as well as in the great Chinese empire and imperial Japan.

Agrarian empires were carried to the Americas by European colonizers. But ever-larger trade routes and expanding monetary systems, fueled in part by American gold and silver, gave ever-greater power to traders and merchants relative to the landowners. Capitalism began to replace feudalism as the economic core of agrarian societies. The early great agrarian rulers, such as the Egyptian pharaoh of the Old Testament who has Joseph gather surplus grain for times of famine, were largely just very mighty redistributors. But with the expansion of a money economy, redistribution gave way, in part, to **markets**. Markets, where goods are bought and sold with common currency and prices are set by a balance of supply and demand, were the domain of merchants. As markets grew in power, merchants grew in wealth, amassing money that they could reinvest to create still greater profits.

Fueled by new interests in science, along with this new science of money, the Industrial Revolution began to transform agrarian societies. Bolstered by the science of war, expanding industrial societies began to displace the agrarian order. Still today, many of the world's so-called developing nations in Asia and Latin America are industrializing agrarian societies. These areas are also home to some of the world's most economically unequal societies.

Along with the dawn of civilization, the rise of cities, the invention of writing, and the widespread use of the wheel, the agricultural revolution brought the beginnings of the world's great religions and philosophies: The period around 3000 BCE (somewhat later in the Americas) witnessed one of the greatest flourishings of human creativity ever. Agrarian societies brought other things as well: widespread slavery and serfdom, chronic warfare, forced taxation, devastating plagues and famines, and malnourished poor who

labored in the shadow of luxury and indulgence. These societies were based on hierarchies of power, seen clearly in both European and Asian **feudalism**, in which peasants served lords who served greater lords who served the king or emperor. They were "deference societies" (Stephens, 1963), in which individuals at each level showed great respect for those on the level above them: Peasants groveled in the dust before lords, who fell on their knees before kings. This pattern of deference, or showing great respect, carried down to the local level and the household. A cautious peasant who controlled a bit of land through the favor of a lord bowed (literally and figuratively) to the lord's every wish. Yet on returning home, this man would expect the same gestures of deference from his wife and children. Age and masculinity might bring control of land, and land was power and the source of prestige. In such a system, wives, daughters, and younger sons were often at the mercy of senior men, who in turn answered to "noblemen." As in most **patriarchal societies**, controlled by senior men, any actions that bent the bounds of traditional gender roles or strict sexual norms were viewed as threats to the system of power and inheritance and were most often severely restricted (Skolnick, 1996).

Agrarian empires brought under one rule many diverse peoples, typically giving prominence to the conquerors and subordinating other ethnic groups. Some ancient empires incorporated diversity without much regard to color or ethnicity. It appears that Alexander the Great, with whom we began this chapter, irked some of his followers not just by spreading Greek culture but by marrying and promoting Persians and adopting some of the ways of the diverse, multiethnic Persian Empire. For rulers such as Alexander, personal loyalty often mattered more than race or ethnicity. Within medieval Mediterranean empires, religion—Christianity or Islam—was often the key divider and determiner of privilege. For their Asian counterparts, such as the great Mongol Empire, religion seemed to matter little. Finally, as European states colonized vast regions of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, they formed empires in which privilege was often based on Europeanness, or "whiteness," and racial divides of color became common. Even as the world industrializes, the patterns of 5,000 years of agrarian society remain built into many traditions and social structures: male privilege, white privilege, class hierarchies. Some elements have been undermined somewhat, such as respect for age, but others have remained quite persistent, such as suspicion of gay and lesbian sexuality.

Life on the Edge: Frontiers and Ports

Before they succumbed to industrial pressures, agrarian societies dominated the planet, but they also shared the world stage with several other societal types, each with its own patterns of inequality. Alongside agrarian societies were a handful of maritime societies in places like Phoenicia, Venice, and, ultimately, the Netherlands. These societies, which depended almost entirely on sea trade, tended to be merchant dominated. Many were republics rather than monarchies, with groups of wealthy and influential traders forming their governments.

In places where native populations were displaced by newcomers, there was also the possibility of forming frontier societies. Frontier societies

survived through farming and herding, but they differed from agrarian societies in that they were populated by newcomers. In general, the landed elites stayed home, so frontier societies were more equal and often, like maritime societies, more republican minded. Labor was often scarce in these societies, so laborers were able to command higher wages and more influence. In time, as elites emerged or were transplanted from elsewhere, frontier societies came to look more like their agrarian counterparts—unless other events intervened. The colonial United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were essentially frontier societies. Although they were agrarian in their livelihood, they developed social patterns that differed from those in their home countries of France and Great Britain. Newcomers had to develop new forms of social organization to work the land they had taken from Native American horticulturalists (or Australian hunter-gatherers or Polynesian horticulturalists in New Zealand). By the mid-1800s, the American and Canadian frontiers had moved westward, creating a fleeting frontier herding society that lives on in the popular imagination, encouraged by Hollywood Westerns. By this time, an economic pattern very similar to older agrarian societies had taken root in the U.S. South: plantation agriculture supported by African slave labor. The great divides that had separated medieval European landowners and their peasants or serfs (peasants tied to the land as virtual slaves) were replicated and supported by a racial divide and a racist ideology. In the northeastern United States, frontier society never had time to establish older agrarian patterns. New England first became a largely maritime society of traders and merchants and then was fully gripped by industrialization. These patterns of the past two centuries have left their mark on the social structure and stratification patterns of the United States, as we will see.

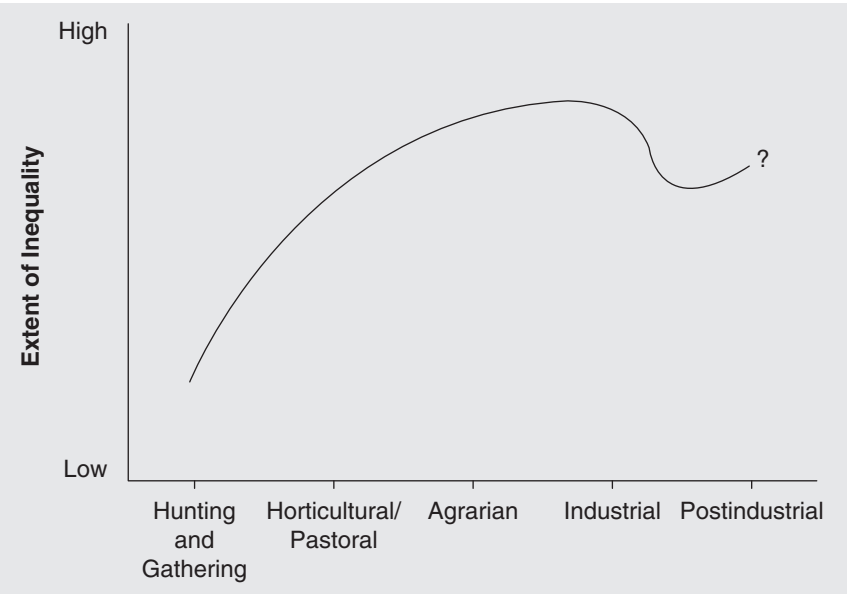
Industrial Societies

The first social change that accompanies industrialization is often increasingly obvious social inequality. The rich may not garner any larger share of a society's goods, but with industrialization there are more goods to amass. The industrial poor may not be any poorer than the agrarian poor, but they now labor alongside the symbols of urban wealth and prosperity. The first country to industrialize was Great Britain in the mid-1700s. Industry made Britain the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the earth. It also led to the horrific conditions and gross inequalities that Charles Dickens made famous in his novels, such as *Oliver Twist,* with its begging and stealing orphans, and *A Christmas Carol,* with its greedy Ebenezer Scrooge and his struggling employee, Bob Cratchit. By the mid-1800s, France, Germany, and the United States were rapidly industrializing in a race to catch up with Great Britain. These nations faced the same experience: greater production, greater power, and increasingly blatant inequalities. In the United States, this was the era of desperately poor immigrant slums in industrial cities and of the fabulously rich "robber barons," whose wealth surpassed anything previously imagined. In the latter portion of the 1800s, European workers revolted and battled with soldiers and police, U.S. workers staged sit-down strikes and fought with state militia, and Karl Marx strode to the British museum to work on books and pamphlets denouncing the evil of it all.

Then an odd thing happened: Inequality declined. Middle classes filled some of the gap between rich and poor, sharing some of the privilege of the rich. Power was still largely class based, but united workers found they could win political concessions. Prestige came to be based on multiple criteria, with political leaders, business leaders, and even entertainers sharing the elite circles. The relation between economy and society is more complex than observers such as Marx could have initially realized. In a famous statement, Marx contended that history does repeat itself, the second time as a parody, or mockery, of the first. One reason we need to take the time to look at disappearing societies is that, in some remarkable ways, they resemble our own. In some aspects of social stratification, it seems, prehistory repeats itself.

Social inequality is at its lowest in hunting and gathering societies. It widens in horticultural and herding societies as noble or privileged family lines are established. It reaches its greatest extremes in agrarian societies, where a rigid class structure often divides the landowning nobility from the peasantry and poor artisans. Inequality is still extreme in early industrial societies, where handfuls of individuals amass great fortunes, while workers confront long hours, miserable conditions, low wages, child labor, and cramped, wretched living conditions. As societies move into an advanced industrial stage, inequality again declines as a more complex class structure with more middle positions emerges (see Exhibit 1.1).

Exhibit 1.1 Inequality by Societal Type



Source: Data from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2004).

This is also a general picture of gender inequality over time. Hunting and gathering societies are marked by considerable gender equality, especially if gathering provides a large portion of the food supply. Women's

position remains strong in many horticultural societies unless chronic fighting elevates the role of the male warrior. Women's position is considerably diminished in most pastoral and agrarian societies. Women still contribute greatly to daily survival, but they are more likely to be cloistered in domestic settings, veiled or otherwise hidden from view, and limited in their ability to own property. In some aspects, they may be treated as the property of fathers and husbands. Early industrial societies do little to elevate the role of women, as poor women are brought into the lowest wage sectors of the new economy in textile mills and sweatshops, doing "piecework" for factories in their homes and doing domestic work in the homes of the wealthy. Advanced industrial societies, however, create new opportunities for women, allowing them to excel in education and industrial skills on par with men. Industrial societies also create new dangers and problems for women, which we will explore in more depth, but often industrialization is followed by women's demands for new roles and improved access to power and privilege. As Rosen (1982) notes,

> Under the impact of industrialization . . . the mystique of male dominance that had for generations kept the female in a subordinate position becomes tarnished, and women, supported by an ideology of sexual equality, challenge their husbands' omnipotence, often with success. The scepter of patriarchal authority does not exactly fall from nerveless male hands; sometimes the wife, emboldened by her new freedom of power, snatches it brusquely from her husband's grasp. (p. 3)

More flexible roles for women often mean gradually greater acceptance of variation in family forms and sexual orientation, although this is a slow process. Youth also tends to become less of a reason to exclude individuals completely from power and rights; for instance, voting is no longer restricted to landowning males. Yet as young people once had to wait to inherit land to gain access to power and privilege, in industrial societies, they often have to wait to acquire educational credentials or to inherit the family enterprise. Life for older people can also be precarious in industrial societies, as they may lose their assurance of family support at the same time they often get little social support. Retirement can mean poverty. Only in advanced industrial societies does the idea of social support for older people become common. Even this can remain precarious, as the continued anxiety in the United States over the future of Social Security illustrates.

An optimistic interpretation of the trend illustrated in Exhibit 1.1 has come to be called the **Kuznets curve,** after economist Simon Kuznets (1955), who first called attention to this trend in national development. The inequality within a society increases until the society reaches a certain point in industrialization at which it declines. Kuznets argued that this describes the experiences of Great Britain, Germany, the United States, and many other advanced industrialized nations. He was less sure it would apply to later-developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The optimistic view is that they will also follow this pattern and that inequality within the poor nations of the world will decline as these nations further their drive to industrialization. Other theorists maintain that poor nations will be prevented

from following this pattern because they will be relegated to a subservient role in the world economy. At this point, we can only note the strong influence of past patterns of economy and society on the world's nations.

The wealthiest nations in the world are the advanced industrial—some would now say ***postindustrial***—societies of Western Europe, North America, and the Asian rim. The poorest nations of the world fit Lenski and Nolan's (1984) description of "industrializing horticultural societies." These are nations in sub-Saharan Africa and isolated portions of South Asia where disparate horticultural and herding societies were united under European colonial rule into single administrations and are now independent nations with populations too large and land too degraded for the inhabitants to continue as small-scale horticulturalists and pastoralists but with limited background in centralized government and national-scale economy. These are the poorest of the poor—Niger, Mali, Mozambique, Somalia, Nepal, Afghanistan—which some have started to refer to as the Fourth World.

The nations in the world with the highest levels of social equality have been the Eastern European remnants of the Soviet "Second World." Hungary and the Czech Republic emerged from years of enforced socialization with inefficient industries and environmental degradation but also with societies far more equal than those to the west. Their transformation has brought new freedoms, new business opportunities, and prosperity for some but unemployment and hard times for others. Their economies are growing, but inequality is also growing. The leader in this divide is Russia. With a handful of entrepreneurs and speculators gaining control of most of the national wealth, while the rest of the economy withers under the feet of workers with declining incomes, the first communist nation is now more unequal than the United States.

The nations of the world with the lowest levels of social equality are the "industrializing agrarian societies" (Lenski & Nolan, 1984) of Latin America and, to a somewhat lesser extent, South Asia. Inequality at its most raw extremes is found in Brazil, with its old plantations and new industry; in Guatemala, with its years of struggle between wealthy landowners and desperate highland *campesinos,* or poor peasants; in El Salvador, where 14 elite families have controlled most of the economy for two centuries; in Panama, where a small handful control the profits of the country's strategic location; and in Bolivia, where 6% of the population own 90% of the land. Pakistan and India also struggle, as the inequalities of an ancient **caste system** are superimposed on the modern inequalities of unequal development.

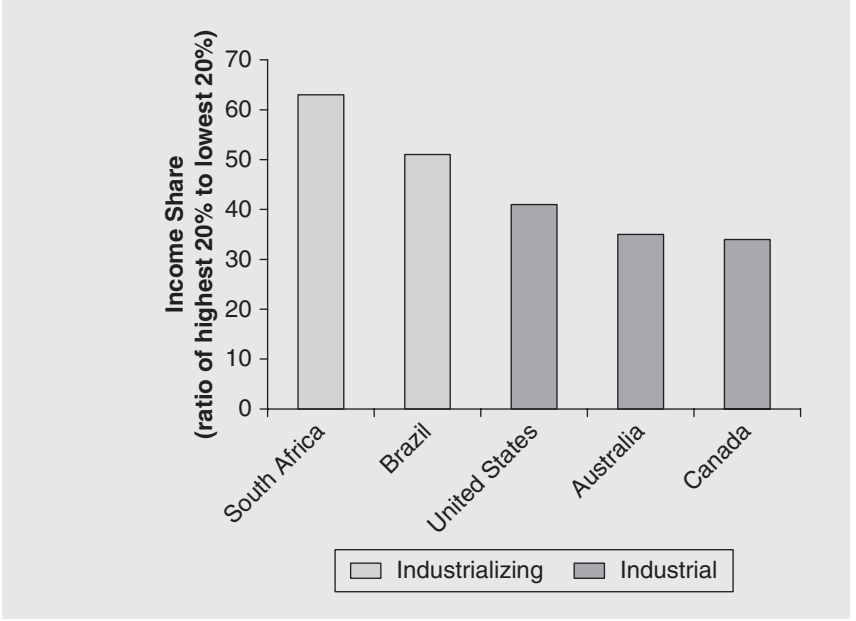
Of the advanced industrial countries, the most unequal are no longer those with rigid class divides inherited from an agrarian past. Great Britain remains socially class-conscious, but 250 years of industrialization have accustomed the British to a society in which cash-strapped dukes and earls rent out their great manors while upstart industrialists grow rich through investments in global manufacturing. France is also still socially class-conscious and a bit more unequal than Great Britain, but all across Western Europe in the 20th century, inequalities were gradually lessened both by demand for technical and skilled labor and by welfare state policies that tax the rich to support small farmers, unemployed workers, older people, and children. Decades of social welfare policies in Western European nations have helped reduce the divide between rich and poor. Most equal are the Scandinavian

countries of Sweden and Norway. Another advanced industrial nation with a fairly small gap between rich and poor is Japan, where defeat in war destroyed old elites and postwar policies have combined with social pressures to limit huge incomes.

The most unequal advanced industrial nations are the former frontier societies. These are often also the least class-conscious, with strong ethics concerning equal standing and equal opportunity and general suspicion of social snobbery. Yet the frontier approach to limited federal government and largely unrestrained markets, coupled with extensive land and resources, has led to vigorous but very unequal income growth for these now industrialized societies. They include the United States, Australia, and Canada (see Exhibit 1.2).

When countries have a frontier heritage and are still in the midst of industrializing, the inequalities are often vast: Brazil and South Africa vie for the title of the most unequal large nation in the world. Former frontier societies also have another element in common: The most entrenched inequality is usually not along old class lines—there is no nobility—but along racial lines. The United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and, to a certain extent, Brazil all have native populations confined to reserves, reservations, homelands, or other isolated, set-aside areas. South Africa, Brazil, and the United States all have histories of turning to African laborers to sustain their economies, imported across the Atlantic in the case of the latter two. Race relations are very different among these three societies, and the nature of race relations is changing rapidly in all of them, but the correlation between color and class remains strong in all three.

Exhibit 1.2 Inequality in Industrial and Industrializing Former Frontier Societies



Source: 2018 Data from World Bank (2019).

The Coming of Postindustrial Society

Have we already begun the shift to another social and economic form? If so, what will its consequences be? Beginning around the mid-1960s and well under way by the 1970s, there has been a shift within advanced industrial economies away from a manufacturing base and toward a service base, a shift we will examine in more detail in Chapter 4. In the early 1970s, Daniel Bell (1973) referred to this shift as "the coming of post-industrial society." Bell was quite optimistic that this change would create new opportunities for many, as the possession of knowledge rather than the control of physical capital would become the key asset. The widening of the ranks of the middle and upper-middle classes would continue as it had with industrial society, as new managers, professional service providers, and skilled technicians would be needed. Because women could provide these skills as well as men, gender inequality would diminish. As skills would become more important than old social divides, racial inequality might also decrease. This optimism is countered by the pessimistic analysis of "deindustrialization" (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982), which asserts that the loss of industrial work undermines the gains of labor unions and the working class, creating unemployment and a "race to the bottom" as workers in advanced industrial economies must compete with poorly paid workers in newly industrializing countries. Hardest hit are the least protected workers—older, female, and nonwhite workers in particular. Inequalities could therefore increase along lines of race, class, and gender. A few profit enormously, while many others lose job security and see falling wages, leading to a shrinking middle class.

The American case has been cited as proof that the Kuznets curve can be inverted: The United States has seen two decades of rapid growth accompanied by widening inequality. The decline in inequality stalled in the 1970s, and by the Reagan years of the 1980s, inequality was growing rapidly, with the United States ahead of Britain, then ahead of France, and far ahead of Scandinavian countries and Japan. Given that the 1980s and the 1990s were periods of strong growth in the U.S. economy, it was not so much that the poor got poorer but that they got nowhere. It took the entire unprecedented growth of the Clinton era for the poorest groups just to recover what they lost in income in the recession of 1990 to 1992. Even that small gain was lost entirely in the recession of 2000 to 2004. Meanwhile, the wealthiest one fifth of Americans watched their incomes soar. The greatest gains went to those who owned a piece of the national wealth. Upper-middle-class Americans with significant holdings in popular mutual funds gained some, and those few who controlled the vast majority of the stocks and assets of the country saw amazing windfalls.

We will look more closely at the dimensions of inequality—class, race, gender, status, and power—in the chapters that follow. Although we can't completely untangle the Gordian knot, we should at least be able to see clearly that the knot was twisted, strand by strand, by human hands. The dimensions of inequality are **social constructions**; that is, they're not facts of nature, but the results of societal forms and patterns of power. The demands of the economy and the desires of ruling groups have divided societies along various lines, and cultural constructions follow to justify and explain societal patterns. What the members of one type of society find "obvious" about the

nature and place of women may sound absurd to the members of another. Differences of color, language, ethnicity, or geography may be crucial determinants of an individual's place in one society and completely irrelevant in another. Yet once these differences become intertwined with class, prestige, and power, it can take years of hard effort to untangle the knot.

A Social Network Understanding of Inequality

Here at the start of our exploration into the dimensions of inequality, we have the beginnings of a theory of the origins of social inequality. Social inequality was not prominent in the tens of thousands of years that humans lived in hunter-gatherer bands, even though the range of inequality in individual talents and abilities (how are you at hunting large aggressive beasts with a spear?) must have been very large. Survival meant a close-knit community that reliably shared. Established inequality emerged as societies grew too large for this sharing. They needed a new social order, and new leaders emerged to control this order. Using charisma, persuasion, communication with spirits, and occasionally coercion, a few "big men" moved into privileged positions in a growing social network. They could use those positions of centrality and power to favor their followers, their own clan and family, and, of course, themselves. As the society grew, so did its resource base and its trade network. The privileged leaders of horticultural villages grew into the nobles and kings of growing agrarian states and, eventually, into the fabulously wealthy emperors of great empires.

This review of the rise of inequality may seem mostly of interest to those with a particular interest in anthropology or historical sociology. But it is also pertinent to our current debates about the nature and future of inequality. Social inequality is rooted not nearly so much in individual talent as it is in commanding a privileged position in a complex social network of economic and social exchange. As these social networks grew, so did the benefits accruing to those in positions of command and control at the core of the system. Likewise, the penalties of being consigned to the margins of the system increased. Access to privileged positions in social networks also became bounded: first by gender, then by ethnicity, religion, and citizenship, and ultimately by race.

This is not just a broad-brush way to make sense of our long history, for it has real implications for how we think about inequality. If social inequality is rooted primarily in the natural order and the inherent differences in human talents and abilities, then it may be both inevitable and justifiable. If, however, inequality is a social construct, rooted in the needs and manipulations of a particular social order at a particular time, then it may be less inevitable. If it is rooted not just in skill but in persuasion, power, prestigious positions, and politics, then we may question whether it is so clearly justifiable. We can begin to ask probing questions about the ethics as well as the origins of inequality. Is it a good thing? For whom? And how much is needed? These questions have stirred social and religious thought for at least 2,500 years of human struggle.

KEY POINTS

- Inequality occurs along various dimensions. Max Weber noted three: class, status, and party. Gerhard Lenski termed the same basic divisions *privilege, prestige*, and *power*, respectively.
- Sociologists have grown increasingly interested in the intersecting dimensions of class, race, and gender, along with other dimensions such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and age.
- Inequality grows as societies become larger and more powerful. Advanced industrial societies have seen a decrease in inequality with the growth of a large middle class. The effects of global, postindustrial economies are still uncertain, but many postindustrial societies are again seeing rises in inequality.
- Different societies vary in the emphasis they place on their constructions of class, race, and gender. Each society creates its own explanations for inequality along these dimensions.
- Attitudes toward race, ethnicity, and gender have shifted in the United States, yet these dimensions still divide the workplace, as seen in the food industry.

FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

1. How has social inequality varied over human experience and history? What has characterized the divides of different forms of societies?
2. Is inequality likely to grow or diminish in the future? What changes or trends support your contention?
3. What do you believe matters most for a person's life chances: race, class, or gender? Is this changing? How are they intertwined in your own experience?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

United Nations

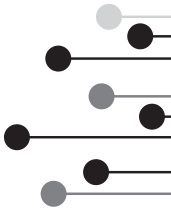
Several organizations based in the United Nations gather and disseminate reliable information on race, class, and gender around the world. The following are examples:

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; see www.unesco.org) makes available very good information on racial, ethnic, and gender issues around the world.
- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF; see www.unicef.org) offers good information on the status of children, including separate data on boys and girls, reports on the Year of the Child, and other materials on children.

CHAPTER

2

The Great Debate



Consider the following questions for a moment:

Is inequality a good thing?

And good for whom? This is a philosophical rather than an empirical question—not is inequality inevitable, but is it good? Some measure of inequality is almost universal; inequalities occur everywhere. Is this because inequality is inevitable, or is it just a universal hindrance (perhaps like prejudice, intolerance, ethnocentrism, and violence)?

Is inequality necessary to motivate people?

Or can they be motivated by other factors, such as a love of the common good or the intrinsic interest of a particular vocation? Note that not everyone, even among today's supposedly highly materialistic college students, chooses the most lucrative profession. Volunteerism seems to be gaining in importance rather than disappearing among college students and recent graduates. Except for maybe on a few truly awful days, I would not be eager to stop teaching sociology and start emptying wastebaskets at my university, even if the compensation for the two jobs were equal. What is it that motivates human beings?

Inequality by what criteria?

If we seek equality, what does that mean? Do we seek equality of opportunities or equality of outcomes? Is the issue one of process? Is inequality acceptable as long as fair competition and equal access exist? In many ways, this might be the American ideal. Would you eliminate inheritance and family advantages for the sake of fairness? What would be valid criteria for equality? Would education be a criterion? Note that this implies that education is a sacrifice to be compensated and not an opportunity and privilege in its own right. Would talent be a criterion? Does it matter how talent is employed? For instance, should talented teachers be compensated as well as talented basketball players, or better? Think about this one carefully, for talent is not a completely benign criterion. Unless they are social Darwinists, most people would not want to see people with severe physical or mental limitations left destitute.

How much inequality is necessary?

Should societies seek to magnify or minimize differences among individuals and groups? Is the issue of inequality a matter of degree? In such a view,

the problem is not with inequality but with gross inequality. If so, should there be limits on inequality? And at which end of the spectrum? Would you propose a limit on how poor someone can be? Would you propose a limit on how rich someone can be? Rewarding individuals according to talent raises the issue of magnifying versus minimizing human differences. Currently, we tend to magnify differences greatly. It is not uncommon for the CEO of a major firm to garner 100 times the income of a factory worker in that firm. Although the CEO may be very talented and very hardworking, it is hard to imagine that he (or, rarely, she) is 100 times as clever, intelligent, or insightful as the workers, and he cannot work 100 times as much, as that would far exceed the number of hours in a week. Human differences are smaller than we sometimes imagine. Let's assume that we use IQ, an arguably flawed measure, as our criterion. Normal IQ ranges from about 80 (below 80, people have intellectual disabilities and might need special provision) to 160 (this is well into the genius range). If everyone were to receive $500 of annual income per IQ point, then the least mentally adept workers would receive $40,000 and the handful of geniuses would receive $80,000—not much of a spread compared with the realities of modern societies. In compensation, should societies magnify or minimize human differences in ability?

The Historical Debate

The prior questions posed are as current as the latest debate in the U.S. Congress and as ancient as the earliest civilization. They have dogged thinkers throughout the entirety of human history—that is, as long as we have been committing thought to writing and as long as we have had sharply stratified societies. Some of the earliest writings that have survived consist of rules of order and justice. Attempts to bring these together—that is, to answer the question of what constitutes a just social order—have been sharply divided from the beginning. In his study of the sweep of inequality across human societies, Gerhard Lenski (1966) divides the responses to this question into the "conservative thesis" and the "radical antithesis." The conservative thesis is the argument that inequality is a part of the natural or divine order of things. It cannot—indeed should not—be changed. Although this view has dominated history, it has been challenged by a counterargument, an antithesis, almost from the very beginning. The radical antithesis is that equality is the natural or divine order of things; inequality, in this view, is a usurpation of privilege and should be abolished or at least greatly reduced.

Arguments From the Ancients

Some of the earliest writings that survive consist of laws, codes, and royal inscriptions. It is perhaps not surprising that most of the ancient rulers, sitting at the pinnacles of their stratified societies, were conservative on the issue of inequality. Hammurabi, king of ancient Babylon around 1750 BCE, was one of the very first to set down a code of laws, a "constitution" for his kingdom. In one sense, Hammurabi was very progressive. Rather than

ruling by whim and arbitrary fiat, he set down a code of laws that specified the rights and duties of his subjects, along with the penalties they faced for infractions. But Hammurabi did not consider all his subjects to be created equal. His laws differed for a "Man," essentially a title of nobility, and for the common man, who apparently did not possess full manhood status. (His laws tended to ignore women altogether, except as the property of their men.) For the same infraction, a common man might have had to pay with his life, whereas a Man would have had to pay only so many pieces of silver. Many modern American judicial reformers have noted that most of the people on prison death rows in the United States are poor and that the wealthy can secure the best lawyers with their "pieces of silver." Corporate crimes are much more often punished with fines than with prison terms. The idea that laws apply differently to different classes of citizens is ancient, and in this, Hammurabi and his counselors were "conservatives."

About the time that Hammurabi was formulating his laws, the Aryan invaders of India were establishing a caste system that formalized, and in some ways fossilized, a stratified society with fixed social positions. According to the Hindu laws of Manu, the different castes came from different parts of the body of the deity Vishnu. This image of parts of society as parts of a body would reemerge in medieval Europe as well as in early sociological descriptions. In India, the ruling Brahmin caste was said to have come from the Great Lord Vishnu's head, whereas the lowly outcaste came from his feet. The laws of Manu stated,

> But in order to protect this universe, He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate duties and occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. (Lenski, 1966, p. 4)

Thus, each person is in an appropriate position according to his or her caste's divine origins—teacher, soldier, cattle herder, lowly servant—"for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds." We might note other origins of the castes as well: Those in the upper classes were largely descended from the conquerors, whereas those in the lower classes were mostly descended from the conquered.

The conservative thesis of an unchanging order of rulers and ruled, privileged and common, received one of its first recorded challenges in the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Often coming from outside the established religious system, these rough-edged oracles stood before kings and denounced not only the idolatry the rulers practiced but also their oppression of the poor.

As early as 1000 BCE, the prophet Nathan denounced King David's adultery with Bathsheba, not for its sexual immorality (the king had many wives and "concubines," or sexual servants) but because it robbed a poor man of his only wife. The prophet Micah denounced the wealthy of his day in strong language:

> *They covet fields and seize them,*
>
> *and houses, and take them.*

They defraud a man of his home,

a fellow man of his inheritance.

Therefore, the Lord says:

I am planning disaster against this people,

from which you cannot save yourselves.

(Micah 2:2–3, *New International Version*)

Likewise, the book of Isaiah is filled with prophetic challenges to religious hypocrisy amid the poverty of the times:

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please

And exploit all your workers . . .

Is not this the kind of fasting I [the Lord] have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?

(Isaiah 58:3, 6–7, *New International Version*)

At times, the prophets were heeded, although more often they were scorned or killed. Yet their writings offer striking examples of the antiquity of the radical antithesis.

A radical contemporary of the Hebrew prophets was the Chinese philosopher Laozi (Lao-tzu). We know little of this elusive man, but the *Daodejing* (or *Tao-te Ching,* translated as *The Way*), a small book, is attributed to him; this work became the foundation of Daoism. Some of its lyrics sound surprisingly contemporary:

When the courts are decked in splendor

weeds choke the fields

and the granaries are bare

When the gentry wears embroidered robes

hiding sharpened swords

gorge themselves on fancy foods

own more than they can ever use

They are the worst of brigands

They have surely lost the way.

(Laozi, *1985 translation from St. Martin's Press*)

Whatever else Laozi was, he was a radical. Yet Asian thinking concerning what constitutes a just social order was as divided as social thought on this subject in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Around 500 BCE, an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama, in spite of all his royal privilege and training in caste ideology, became miserable as he pondered the state of humanity and the misery of the poor. He fasted and meditated until he reached the enlightenment that earned him the title of the Buddha. He taught that liberation from suffering means giving up desire and that right living means moderation in all things, caring for all things, and the giving of alms. He asserted that the highest calling is the voluntary poverty of the monk. The prince had become a radical. His conservative counterpart was a Chinese bureaucrat and adviser, Kong Fuzi, known to Westerners as Confucius. Confucius believed in justice, duty, and order, but his just order was extremely hierarchical. Foremost was duty to the family and respect for elders, especially elder males or patriarchs. The emperor was the ultimate patriarch, a wise father figure who did what was right but also enjoyed unquestioned authority and privilege. According to Confucius, in a good society each individual knows his or her place and does not challenge the Way of Heaven. Confucius may have shared some ideas with his elder countryman Laozi, but for Confucius, the divine order was fundamentally conservative.

The teachings of both Confucius and the Buddha have had tremendous influence across much of Asia. The fact that social equality has not necessarily been any more common in Buddhist societies than in Confucian societies reminds us that leaders often alter the tenets of great thinkers to suit their own purposes. At the same time, many individuals have used religious tenets to challenge the existing order and repressive power. For example, Buddhist principles have inspired followers of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet in his struggles against Chinese occupation, as well as followers of Nobel Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in her struggles against the repressive military rulers of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma).

A century after Confucius and Lao-tzu, a similar debate in views took place between a great teacher and his star pupil. The professor was clearly a radical, but his protégé was to become a moderate conservative. They lived in ancient Athens, a democracy that gave voice to male citizens but was clearly divided into privileged men and cloistered women, free citizens and slaves, rich and poor. Plato, the radical, looked at his Athens and saw in it the picture of all the Greek city-states, and indeed all state societies:

> For any state, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the state of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another.
>
> (The Republic, ***bk. 4, translation by Benjamin Jowett)***

No more succinct and vigorous statement of class struggle would come until the time of Karl Marx. Plato had a simple but compelling theory of social inequality: Whatever their commitments as citizens to the welfare of the state, all parents tend to be partial to their own children and to give them special advantages. This allows these children to prosper and in turn pass on even greater advantage to ***their*** children. In time, the divides separating

families become both large and fixed, resulting in a class of "noble" birth and a class of "common" birth. Plato's solution to the inequality this causes was the communal raising of children, apart from their families—a children's society of equals in which the only way individuals could excel would be through their own abilities. Plato was a communist. His ideas on forbidding family privilege must have seemed as radical in his age as the similar ideas of Marx and Engels did in the 19th century. They are also, however, the basis of the ideal of universal public education, which is gradually being embraced by the entire modern world. In his greatest work, ***The Republic,*** Plato envisioned his ideal state, one in which no inequalities exist except those based on personal talent and merit. In such a state, the wisest would rule as philosopher-kings, looking after the interests of all the people. They would have great power but no great wealth or privilege; presumably, they would be so wise and altruistic that they wouldn't care about such things.

Plato never wielded much real political influence; he was probably too radical even for Athens. Yet one of his students certainly had influence. Aristotle rose from Plato's tutelage to become what medieval scholars would call the sage of the ages, serving as tutor and adviser to the empire builder of the age, Alexander the Great. But Aristotle never advised Alexander to build his empire on the model of Plato's ***Republic,*** for Aristotle believed in the same idea of a natural order of inequality that the Hindus and the Babylonians had before him:

> It is clear that some men are by nature free and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right.
>
> *("On Slavery," in* The Politics, *translation by Benjamin Jowett)*

The sage of the ages was clearly a conservative. To be fair, Aristotle did not believe a society should be marked by extremes of wealth and poverty; rather, he recommended a golden mean between these extremes. For Aristotle, however, inequality was rooted in human nature. The Romans, who succeeded the Greeks in dominating the Mediterranean, built their empire on this Aristotelian view of the world, as had Alexander. Like many others, the Romans also gave their ideology of inequality a "racial" basis that could justify slavery. The influential Roman orator and counselor Cicero warned his friend Atticus: "Do not obtain your slaves from Britain because they are so stupid and so utterly incapable of being taught that they are not fit to form a part of the household of Athens."

The Challenge From New Faiths

Roman ideals of order faced at least one memorable challenge. It came from a tradesman's son and his followers in the remote province of Galilee. When they confronted the existing social order, Jesus, his brother, James, and especially his Greek biographer, Luke, sounded quite radical. Luke records Jesus as telling his followers, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," while warning, "Woe to you that are rich, you have already received it all" (Luke 6:20, 6:24, *New International Version*).

Jesus warned that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, and he told at least one wealthy man who wanted to follow him to first give all his money to the poor. Jesus was fond of reminding his listeners that God has chosen the lowest outcasts to be rich in faith and that, in a time to come, those who are last will be first. As leader of the early church, his brother, James, seems to have encouraged this same approach:

> Has not God chosen those who are poor . . . ? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?
>
> (James 2:5–6, *New International Version)*

It is not surprising that Jesus and most of his early followers did not win the praise and favor of the rulers, whether political or religious, of the time. Jesus and his followers practiced communal sharing and challenged the existing order; they were radicals. At least one of Jesus's followers, however, appears to have favored a more moderate approach. Lenski (1966) calls the apostle Paul a conservative. Some of Paul's ideas on the divine order, in fact, sound quite radical. He wrote to one of his churches, "For before God there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free" (Galatians 3:28, *New International Version*). Yet Paul, a Greek-speaking Jew who was born to some privilege as a Roman citizen, encouraged his followers to accommodate and support the existing order. He told them they should pray for rulers rather than denouncing them because rulers are God's instruments for keeping the peace. It was this Paul, the conservative, rather than the man who worked alongside women and slaves, who would come to be most cited by the established Christian church. It is perhaps not surprising that once the church became an official institution in the empire, with its own access to power and privilege, the most conservative passages of Paul's view of order—such as "Slaves obey your masters"—would become the key tenets. Still, throughout the period of early Christianity there were those, such as the Desert Fathers, who clung to the more neglected passages, such as "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24, *New International Version*) and abandoned all luxury to live harsh lives in remote regions.

In the early seventh century, a new prophetic voice emerged in the desert. A minor merchant and sometime shepherd, Muhammad, called followers to a life of devotion to Allah, the one true God. His was a message of religious reform more than social reform. Still his ideas of a brotherhood—and sisterhood, for he seemed to endorse the Christian idea that men and women are equal before God even if in different social roles—of believers who are servants of God alone had important social implications. The city of Mecca had become a center of international trade and finance, but with it came a new business ethic of wealth and advancement in place of the tribal communal values. Muhammad believed that if his people were to honor the one God of justice and righteousness, they would need to overcome religious idolatry and also the greed and egotism of the new markets (Armstrong, 1993).

The rulers and powerful merchants of Mecca soon saw the threat, and Muhammad was driven from the city. The Qur'an, Muhammad's great revelation, describes a theocracy obedient to Allah and, like the earliest times of ancient Israel, without kings. At the same time, as in the writings attributed to the apostle Paul, the Qur'an accepts much of the social pattern of the ancient world but with new sensitivities: Slavery is acceptable, but Muslims should not enslave other Muslims; women are encouraged in traditional domestic roles and great modesty but are also to be treated with great respect; the poor and the needy are assumed to continue, but all Muslims must give alms, a required donation, to the poor. Shrewd business practices, including the charging of interest on loans, are traditionally forbidden. This tension between radical and conservative Christianity continued throughout the Middle Ages, just as the tension between radical and conservative philosophies tugged back and forth across Asia. The dominant view of medieval theology was decidedly conservative. In the 12th century, John of Salisbury revived the image of the body—now the body of Christ—to explain social inequality: The prince is the head, the senate the heart, the soldiers and officials the hands, and the common people the feet, and so they rightfully work in the soil.

Yet throughout this time, there were always opposing voices, which, although they rarely swayed powerful popes, kings, or emperors, did draw their own followings. St. Francis, born to considerable wealth in Assisi, Italy, gave away his inheritance to live a life of wandering poverty, preaching a gospel for the poor. He was beloved by poor villagers in Italy and argued for persuasion over conquest during the Crusades. The Roman Catholic Church came close to excommunicating him, but instead, it eventually embraced his devotion, even if not all parts of his lifestyle. Less able to stay within the bounds of official authority, the followers of Peter Waldo lived communally in the mountains of Italy, denounced the wealth of the church, and were eventually severely repressed. They were simply too radical, not just in their lifestyle, as Francis was, but in their social demands, for the church to accept them.

Eventually, other groups broke from the Roman Catholic Church. The theology of the Protestant reformers may have seemed radical to their times, but most of their social philosophy was not. Martin Luther's call for a priesthood of all believers had radical implications that would alter northern Europe. Yet Luther welcomed the protection of German princes, and when peasants rose in revolt, Luther denounced their rage. Likewise, many of the Calvinists of the Netherlands and of Scotland were emerging middle-class entrepreneurs who would alter the social structures of their societies. Yet Calvin, like Luther, took his cues on social order from Paul, endorsing respect for rulers and sanctioned authorities and disdaining social upheaval. Sociologist Max Weber (1905/1997) saw in the ethics of the Protestant reformers the beginnings of the demise of old medieval divisions between nobility and peasantry. But Weber believed, theirs was the new spirit of capitalism that also embraced inequality—as long as it was "earned" by hard work and reinvested for more profit rather than squandered in personal excess. One group differed from this pattern: the so-called Anabaptists of what became known as the radical reformation. They rejected church hierarchies in favor of a brotherhood of believers committed to humility, simplicity, and nonviolence. Even though as pacifists the members of this group posed no