

and Vietnamese Americans, or Cuban and Puerto Rican Americans).

Racial stratification can be clearly observed in the segregation of different groups. Although racial segregation in housing or education is no longer sanctioned by law, de facto segregation still remains in these two areas. This is especially prevalent among African American and Hispanic American groups, who often live in racially homogenous locations that also tend to have lower average income levels. This informal segregation is highly problematic because individuals living in lower-income areas often attend schools of lower quality, face discrimination in housing (i.e., less access to home loans), which leads to lower wealth accumulation and lower overall quality of life.

These differences become more tangible when examining problems such as the persisting “education gap” in test scores between different racial groups. In standardized test scores at all education levels, African Americans consistently perform most poorly, followed closely by Hispanic and American Indian youth. Asian groups, on the other hand, often perform as highly as, or higher than, their white counterparts. Some authors claim that the education gap is at least in part due to resource differentials derived from de facto segregation. Others argue that structural disparities and continuing discrimination are factors that have led African American and Hispanic students to avoid “acting white,” which is often correlated in their minds with having high educational achievement.

In addition to education, race stratification is also embedded within the institution of work, where median income levels vary by race. In 2006, non-Hispanic white households earned \$52,423. In comparison, African American households earned \$31,969 (61 percent of non-Hispanic whites) and Hispanic households earned \$37,781 (72 percent of non-Hispanic whites). Further reflecting the educational trends previously discussed, Asian American households earned \$64,238 (123 percent of non-Hispanic whites). Both educational and work disparities perpetuate systemic differences among racial groups in the United States by limiting earning potential. In a country in which wealth and education lead to upward mobility, minority groups who live in segregated areas and have differing educational achievement face higher hurdles, which serve to perpetuate stratification.

Fifty years after the civil rights movement, groups in the United States continue to challenge existing racial stratification. However, without alteration of

structural features and cultural beliefs affecting race, it will likely remain a stratifying characteristic in the foreseeable future.

*Laura Auf der Heide*

**See also** Discrimination; Discrimination, Institutional; Education, Academic Performance; Income Disparity; Inner City; Segregation; Stratification, Social; Wage Gap; Wealth Disparities

### Further Readings

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## STRATIFICATION, SOCIAL

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Social stratification is a structured ranking of categories of people who receive unequal amounts of wealth, power, and status from generation to generation. It is a cultural universal found in almost every society from the past to present. However, the basis upon which stratification rests may vary through time and from one society to another. In order to be accepted by all members of society, including those of low rank, every system of stratification must have a legitimizing ideology. This legitimizing ideology typically justifies inequality through claims to transcendental ideas, usually from religion. Examples of major systems of stratification include caste, slavery, estate or feudal, and social class.

While the British monarchy is a remnant of a European caste system, the oldest worldwide example that most closely approximates the type based on ideas is that of India. India’s caste system has four primary divisions (*varnas*), each one with multiple subcastes (*jatis*). About 160 million people considered “untouchables” and known as *Dalits* (or as *harijans*—“children

of god,” Gandhi’s term) are at the bottom of this caste system, which has been rigid (although this is breaking down now), with little if any mobility between castes. Ascribed at birth, caste position determines virtually all aspects of life, including, for example, the type of work one is allowed to perform, marriage partners, rights, and obligations. Here, caste has determined social status that then determined one’s wealth, in contrast to a class system in which wealth largely determines social status. Finally, this extreme system of inequality has persisted partly because the internalization of the system’s legitimizing ideology rests on the Hindu religion.

Slavery is another ancient system of stratification still found in various forms in some parts of the world. The distinguishing characteristic of slave systems is that a person can legally own another human being as property. Individuals have usually become slaves in one of three ways: ascription by birth, military conquest or capture, or debt. In ancient societies, slavery was mostly ascribed or the result of military conquest. Slaves could obtain their freedom by purchasing it from their owner. Slaves also held a variety of social positions, including some with high prestige or authority. In the United States, slavery was based on capture (among Native Americans) or ascription (children of African slaves were themselves slaves). Although possible, most slaves would rarely have opportunities to obtain their freedom legally. In the latter case, a legitimizing ideology—this time racism—justified this practice of white superiority.

The estate or feudal system is characteristic of agrarian societies. The best approximation to the ideal type occurred in medieval Europe, where feudalism existed through ownership of land by militaristic nobility that provided protection to the peasants or serfs in exchange for their labor to cultivate the land. Around the 12th century, this system evolved into the estate system, comprised of nobles, priests, soldiers, craftsmen, and commoners. As the system matured, it became increasingly rigid, with class positions defined by ascription. Originally based on tradition and custom, during the estate period the legitimizing ideology became increasingly based in law, as religious leaders argued that the nobility represented “God’s” will to govern in his name. Under this system of stratification, social inequality was high.

Social class is historically the newest form of stratification, one essentially derived from capitalist industrialization. Under a class system, ascribed status is still a major determinant of one’s social position, but

it is possible to experience social mobility and change position based on merit and effort. Income and wealth primarily define social class, while the system’s legitimizing ideology is the belief that equal opportunity exists for all. Karl Marx viewed class stratification as determined exclusively by ownership of the means of production that generate wealth. However, other theorists such as Max Weber argued that class position is determined not exclusively by wealth but also by status and power. For example, Weber argued that a high rank in one category such as wealth did not necessarily imply high rank in status or power, although normally that was the case. Rather, some people could experience status inconsistency, such as a college professor who may enjoy high social status but a lower level of wealth.

### The Davis and Moore Hypothesis

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore exemplify the functionalist sociological approach to stratification. They argued that every society requires the performance of important jobs that require certain levels of skill, training, and innate ability. To induce those capable of performing these jobs to undertake the necessary training, they must receive higher rewards, thereby justifying social inequality. Although their argument sounds rational, it does not explain why the salaries of some highly valued jobs, such as clergy and teachers, have low rewards. It also fails to explain why the salaries of movie and rock stars far exceed those of people considered more valuable, such as doctors or accountants. Finally, their argument does not address why some jobs are valued more than others in the first place.

### Conflict Theory

According to conflict theorists, stratification is the result of the capitalist system that exploits those with little to no power. They argue that those who have wealth and power shape laws in a manner that protects their own class interests. For example, stealing a loaf of bread is the punishable offense of theft, even if the thief is a poor hungry child. In his essay, “Labor Theory of Value,” Marx argued that the capitalist class (*bourgeoisie*) exploits the working class (*proletarians*) through its ownership of the means of production, such as factories. This allows the capitalist class to offer workers wages below their fair value. Capitalist

business owners keep the difference between what they pay workers and the full value of their work, thus making the owners wealthy. In addition, Marx argued that the capitalist system of work leads to workers experiencing alienation from their products, society, and even themselves.

Marx believed that the only way to end exploitation would be through a social revolution by the working class. He also believed that the absence of a workers' revolution was because of their false class consciousness. Working people are unaware of their class exploitation because they have accepted capitalism's legitimizing ideology produced by the upper class to secure everyone's conformity to the system.

### The Classless Society

The only society with no stratification would be a communist one, as advocated by Marxists. Historically, such a society existed in prehistoric times with human groups that were hunters and gatherers and where little distinction existed between members as they enjoyed basic equality with one another in primitive communal societies.

Nineteenth-century utopian idealists and hippies in the 1960s also experimented with classless communes, many of them short lived. No large-scale, modern communist society has ever existed; the former Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and North Korea do not fit the true definition of communism. Instead these societies are better described as socialist dictatorships that base stratification on Communist Party affiliation rather than wealth. Authentic communism may never occur on a large scale, given the necessary idealistic preconditions to make such a society possible. Perhaps this is why theoretical communist societies are also called utopian, which means to some "admirable but impractical in real life."

*John Asimakopoulos*

**See also** Alienation; Class; Class Consciousness; False Consciousness; Gini Coefficient; Inequality; Power Elite; Slavery; Socioeconomic Status; Wealth Disparities

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## STRESSORS

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More than 50 years ago Hans Selye, a Canadian endocrinologist, defined *stress* as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand." In laboratory experiments, Selye exposed rats to a variety of noxious chemicals and extreme environmental conditions that he labeled "demands." The environmental demands included freezing temperatures, constant light, deafening noise, and nonstop exercise via motor-driven treadmills and constant swimming to avoid drowning. Selye found that when these demands threw the rats' normal operating systems (respiration, circulation, digestion, and temperature regulation) too far out of their normal range of functioning, they adjusted by initiating a complex pattern of physiological changes that he called the "stress response." Not only did the rats initiate this life-saving response, but the response was the same regardless of the type of demand that triggered it. Selye called this phenomenon the "nonspecific response to any demand." Besides rats, Selye replicated the response with mice, rabbits, dogs, cats, and other laboratory animals. The *nonspecificity* of the response to *any* demand was the key factor in the development of Selye's stress theory.

### What Are Stressors?

Researchers since Selye often refer to demands as *stressors*. Stressors are the people, things, and situations that create unusual or excessive demands on people, leaving them feeling threatened and unable to cope. Most people suffer from social stressors associated with work, school, relationships, family life, and