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## MODERN THEORIES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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Shown relaxing at home in a picture taken by his wife, C. Wright Mills was ahead of his time in explaining how America's political and economic institutions allowed for a power elite to increasingly be able to dominate the nation and world.

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

VIEWS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN AMERICA:

EARLY YEARS

FUNCTIONAL THEORIES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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THE BASES OF CLASS STRATIFICATION AND CLASS LOCATION

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SUMMARY

NOTE

## VIEWS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN AMERICA: EARLY YEARS

Though today most sociologists consider social stratification one of the most important areas of study, this has not always been the case. In fact, the importance of this subject in understanding society and human behavior has been widely recognized by American sociologists only in the past fifty years, at most. The contrast to European social thought is clear. As we noted in the previous chapter, Marx, Weber, and even those before them such as Comte and Saint-Simon began their studies of society with the nature of class divisions and inequality as central questions (see Strasser 1976). What accounts for this contrast to American sociology? Our answer to this question can, in part, help us understand the state of stratification theory today.

Sociology as a separate discipline of study in the United States dates back only to about the early 1900s. But in the works of the founders of American sociology (men such as William Graham Sumner, Albion Small, and Edward Ross), we find a rather classless view of American society (Pease, Form, and Huber 1970; for a summary of these works see Gordon 1963; Page 1969). The relative neglect of social stratification is not surprising, however. Unlike in European nations, the old rigid class and estate inequalities were less in evidence. The value system stressed equality of opportunity for all, and at least an appearance of opportunity and democracy was in greater evidence. Not until the Great Depression of the 1930s was this classless image seriously reexamined, and then only by a few social scientists. Even then, many years passed before the study of social stratification was able to make a significant break with American classless mythology.

The first detailed American study in social stratification appeared in 1929 with Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown*, followed later by *Middletown in Transition* (1937). This first work was to establish a long tradition of stratification studies of small community life in the United States. But the general conflict perspective of this study was only much later a part of this tradition. The Lynds' focus was on power and economic inequalities, and the overpowering image of equality of opportunity in American society was exposed as a myth (see Gordon 1963:66). With the depression over, their view of American society was placed on the shelf and all but forgotten.

Of the social stratification research stimulated by the Great Depression, Lloyd Warner's work (in the 1930s and 1940s) had the most significant impact, at least for the next twenty to thirty years. Like the Lynds' research, Warner's many-volume *Yankee City* study (as well as others by his students) was centered on social stratification in small communities. Using various methods of study, from survey research to detailed participant observation, these works sought to examine the extent of inequality and social mobility, as well as the meaning of social stratification for the people involved.

But the Warner school differed from the Lynd tradition in three important ways. Most importantly, the Warner school came to define social stratification in terms of *status* (Weber's second dimension of social stratification). As Warner (and Lunt 1941:82) wrote: "By class is meant two or more orders of people who are believed to be, and are accordingly ranked by the members of the community, in superior and inferior positions." With such a view, inequalities of power and economic dominance were easily ignored, and the dynamics of conflict related to these stratification dimensions were dismissed.

Secondly, the Warner school failed to examine the actual extent of equality of opportunity critically. In the face of contrary experience highlighted by the depression, this research tradition continued to stress a "reality" of social mobility for all who had the talent and ambition to succeed, a finding now disputed in a reanalysis of *Yankee City* (Thernstrom 1964).

Finally, we find in the Warner school an emphasis on social stratification as *functional* and necessary for complex societies like our own. The conflict, the structured and hereditary nature of inequalities, the harsh conditions for workers, and the extensive poverty all too often found in the expansion of American capitalism were all but ignored.

The primary points are these:

1. During the earliest stage of American sociology the subject of social stratification was generally ignored. With very few exceptions, such as in the work of Thorstein Veblen, it was as if "nasty" conditions of class conflict, hereditary wealth, and race and class exploitation did not exist in the "classless" American society.

2. It took the experience of this country's most severe economic crisis to bring many social scientists to face the reality of rigid class inequalities. But even when this happened, the sobering reality forced upon us by this economic crisis was for most social scientists short-lived.

3. When the study of social stratification was increasingly taken up by American social scientists, the more palatable subject of *status* inequality dominated their work. The praise of America as the most classless of all industrial societies would continue for some time.

All of the preceding would be worthy of no more than a short footnote in the history of American sociology were it not for the fact that this tradition of stratification research remains to a large degree. As we will see, conflict perspectives have only recently become more widely respected by academic social scientists as a counter to the limited view of functional theories of social stratification. Research continues to be dominated by mobility studies that focus attention on individual characteristics rather than the structured and rigid inequalities of wealth and power (see Huber and Form 1973:36). Our research on poverty, for example, is still struggling to escape the "culture of poverty" perspective that focuses attention on characteristics of the poor (or what is wrong with the poor), rather than directing our attention to the wider stratification system that helps maintain poverty (Kerbo 1981a).

However, a tradition of stratification theory and research was at least begun. The Warner school stimulated many students, and there was soon a wide variety of research on subjects such as differing class values and lifestyles, occupational prestige (if not occupational power), and the degree and causes of social mobility (Pease, Form, and Huber 1970). One review of the early stratification literature found at least 333 research articles and books on the subject published between 1945 and 1953 (Pfautz 1953). By 1954 the first American textbook on the subject was published (Cuber and Kenkel 1954).

The study of social stratification by the 1950s, however, was clearly dominated by a *functional* perspective. It was a perspective more in line with that of Durkheim than

Marx or even Weber. Such dominance could not last. As social scientists looked more deeply, the American values of equality of opportunity and free enterprise began to appear as questionable guides to the reality of social stratification in this country.

The break with functional theory came first with Floyd Hunter's (1953) study of community power, then most dramatically with C. Wright Mills's (1956) description of a power elite on the national level. Before Watergate, Vietnam, the energy crisis, and our discovery of poverty and discrimination in the 1960s, these works were ahead of their time. And though they were initially attacked by social scientists (see Domhoff and Ballard 1968, for these attacks), just as Einstein's paradigm-breaking work was originally attacked, they could not long be ignored.

Functional views of social stratification don't have to be completely discarded, and conflict theories don't have all the answers. But functional theories of social stratification are limited. We must turn to some of these theories to see what they do have to offer, and their exact limitations.

## **FUNCTIONAL THEORIES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

Within the functional or uncritical-order paradigm described in Chapter 4, and following the Warner tradition described here, we find two most prominent modern functional theories of social stratification. The first of these was published by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore in 1945, somewhat amended by Kingsley Davis in 1948, and has come to be known simply as the Davis and Moore theory of social stratification. The theory was "logically" constructed to show why social stratification and inequality are positively functional, and therefore necessary in all but the simplest human societies. The second theory is from the more abstract and general functional perspective of Talcott Parsons. This theory does not contradict that of Davis and Moore, but its focus is on social order more generally and the function of social stratification for the overall maintenance of social order.

### **The Davis and Moore Theory**

The Davis and Moore theory clearly and simply outlined the functional view of social stratification as necessary to meet the needs of complex social systems. In other words, from a perspective that considers society as something like an organism, the theory argued that this organism has needs that must be met if it is to remain healthy. Among these needs is for the most important positions or jobs in the society to be staffed by the most qualified and competent people. Social stratification is considered a mechanism that ensures that the need is met.

The following seven points provide a basic summary of the theory (Tumin 1953):

1. Certain positions in any society are functionally more important than others, and require special skills to fill them.
2. Only a limited number of people in any society have the talents that can be trained into the skills appropriate to these positions.
3. The conversion of talents into skills involves a training period during which sacrifices of one kind or another are made by those undergoing the training.

4. In order to induce the talented people to undergo these sacrifices and acquire the training, their future positions must carry an inducement value in the form of a differential—that is, privileged and disproportionate access to the scarce and desired rewards the society has to offer.

5. These scarce and desired goods consist of the rights and prerequisites attached to, or built into, the positions, and can be classified into those things that contribute to (a) sustenance and comfort, (b) humor and diversion, and (c) self-respect and ego expansion.

6. This differential access to the basic rewards of the society has as a consequence the differentiation of the prestige and esteem various strata acquire. It may be said to constitute, along with the rights and prerequisites, institutionalized social inequality: that is, stratification.

7. Therefore, social inequality among different strata in the amounts of scarce and desired goods and the amounts of prestige and esteem they receive is both positively functional and inevitable in any society.

At face value the Davis and Moore theory of stratification appears a simple, clear, and valid explanation of inequality and social stratification in industrial, if not all, societies. In a sense it is a labor market model analyzing the supply and demand of labor as it relates to rewards for labor. In short, when the supply of skilled labor is low in relation to the amount of labor needed, the employer (in Davis and Moore's perspective, the society) will be required to pay more for this labor. *But* the Davis and Moore view of this labor market model is flawed. And several social scientists have revealed other problems of logic and omission over the years. The Davis and Moore theory doesn't have to be rejected on every point, but it does need to be amended in several respects. Let us turn first to some of the criticisms of the Davis and Moore theory, then go on to some empirical research.

**Critiques of Davis and Moore** We may begin with one of the most far-reaching criticisms of the implied labor market model behind the Davis and Moore theory. As Collins (1975:420) argues: "Following through the pure market model leads us to a startling conclusion: The system must tend toward perfect equality in the distribution of wealth." This is the opposite of what Davis and Moore suggest with their theory to explain why an unequal distribution of rewards must exist.

One problem with the theory is that Davis and Moore neglect restraints on the labor market in the form of unequal power and influence: that is, conflict assumptions. Without such market restraints there would be a tendency toward equality because where labor is free to move to higher-paying jobs, the jobs that pay high wages will attract a surplus of workers, leading to a decline in the income for these jobs. Jobs paying low wages would tend to attract fewer workers. Without market restraints, "wherever jobs pay above or below the average, processes are set in motion through labor mobility which eventually bring wages back into line with all the others" (Collins 1975:120).

And if we consider other rewards attached to positions, such as a good working environment or the prestige that comes with greater skill, we might find another result oppo-

site from that predicted by Davis and Moore. Again assuming a free-market model, we might find that, for example, a physician would be paid *less* (in income) than a garbage collector because of the other rewards (such as prestige and working environment) attached to the position of physician.

Davis and Moore have two lines of defense to this criticism. Both, however, are weak. On the one hand, Davis (1948) amended the theory shortly after it was published to say that the family structure will create a restraint on equal access to occupations. This occurs because those families higher in the stratification system will be able to secure better access to education and jobs for their children. Davis argues that their original theory was abstract theoretical reasoning, and in real life other factors will influence the process they described. But, of course, this is the point of critiques from conflict theorists! The question is, how much does the theory part from real life? The critics argue that real life is far different from the theory.

Davis and Moore, on the other hand, argue in the original theory that not everyone is equally talented or capable of performing the tasks of some very important positions. In this sense they do not acknowledge free labor competition. Many people could collect garbage, but only a few have the talent to become physicians. But again we find a weakness in the theory. Are there really so few people with the talent to make it through medical school and become physicians? The critics' response is no. Many people have the talent to become physicians, but in reality there are limitations on who and how many people can become physicians because of the ability of the medical profession to restrict and limit access to training for the occupation.

There is also the question of what, in fact, the most important positions in the society are. The critics' response is that those with power are able to influence which positions are defined as most important (see Tumin 1963; Cohen 1968:60; Kerbo 1976a). And some criticism questions the *degree* of inequality necessary among positions in our society. One may grant the assumption that a physician is more important than a garbage collector, or at least that the position of physician requires more training and skill. But, for example, if we find that the physician earns fifty to one hundred times more income than the garbage collector, can we say that the physician is fifty to one hundred times more important than the garbage collector? Or do some occupations provide greater control and influence that allow them to demand greater pay?

Finally, among other criticisms of the functional theory of Davis and Moore is Tumin's (1953:393), pointing out how social stratification and high inequality can at times be dysfunctional for the society. For example, "Social stratification systems function to limit the possibility of discovery of the full range of talent available in a society because of unequal access to appropriate motivation, channels of recruitment, and centers of training." Thus, social stratification systems can function to set limits upon the possibility of expanding the productive resources of the society. Also, "To the extent that inequalities in social rewards cannot be made fully acceptable to the less privileged in a society, social stratification systems function to encourage hostility, suspicion, and distrust among the various segments of a society and thus to limit the possibilities of extensive social integration." The result of this, as other theories and research tell us, is a higher level of social problems such as crime.

**Empirical Research on the Davis and Moore Theory** Although it is often difficult to examine general theories of social stratification empirically, the Davis and Moore theory does make some specific predictions that can be tested. But even here, it is most difficult to measure and test all important propositions suggested by the theory.

Abrahamson (1973) has empirically examined the proposition that the most important positions in a society will be more highly rewarded. To measure functional importance, Abrahamson reasoned, periods in which some needs of the society have undergone change can be considered. One such change may be during times of war. In this case, it is suggested, positions in the military would be functionally more important than during peacetime. Comparing three military positions and three similar occupations in the private sector over a period from 1939 to 1967, which included three wars, Abrahamson was able to find adequate data on only about one-half of the comparisons. The Davis and Moore thesis appears supported in eleven out of the twelve comparisons.

Abrahamson's test of the Davis and Moore theory, however, has received extensive criticism. For example, in addition to neglecting the potential effects of scarcity of qualified workers, the study does not show that more qualified personnel were attracted to these positions when pay increased (a key point in the Davis and Moore thesis). But most importantly, as Leavy (1974) suggests, many of the industrial workers during the three war periods included in the study were involved in military production, a fact making the comparisons less meaningful.

In other research, Abrahamson (1979) found that scarcity and importance of differing positions on major-league baseball teams are related to the pay of these positions, as Davis and Moore would predict. But in a study of corporate executive income, Broom and Cushing (1977) found that the functional importance of a corporate executive (measured by how many other workers depend on the executive role) and the performance of an executive (corporate profits and growth) were not related to income. Further, Broom and Cushing (1977) found that corporations that could be assumed to be more important for a society (producing products such as steel, food, drugs, and clothing) did *not* pay their executives more than executives were paid in less functional corporations (such as those producing tobacco, cosmetics, and soft drinks). Again, the Davis and Moore theory is not supported.

A number of empirical studies have shown that the general population in this nation, as well as in others, tends to believe that inequality and social stratification *should* operate in a manner generally suggested by the Davis and Moore theory (for example, Grandjean and Bean 1975; Jasso and Rossi 1977; Alves and Rossi 1978; see also Verba and Orren 1985; Coxon, Davies, and Jones 1986; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). And opinion polls show that compared to people in England, Germany, Japan, Hungary, and Poland, Americans are much more likely to think that there is equality of opportunity in America, thus indicating they tend to think the stratification system in America operates in a manner suggested by the functional theory of stratification (Ladd and Bowman 1998:118). But, of course, this does not mean that the theory fits reality. We have examined some of the limited empirical research on this question, and the overall findings are at best mixed. And as we will see in a coming chapter, the United States in fact *does not* have more equality of opportunity than other industrial nations.

## Parsons' Functional Theory of Social Stratification

Compared with the Davis and Moore theory, Talcott Parsons' work is much more general and abstract. One of the central figures in modern American sociology, Parsons developed a theory that is often considered the most important functional statement on all aspects of society ever made. But, as stated, his work is so abstract and highly theoretical that few precise empirical predictions can be made or tested from it (as Parsons admitted, 1977). Nonetheless, Parsons' work has been highly influential in carrying on the tradition of Durkheim and the Warner school of social stratification in American sociology. In this section we will consider briefly the major components of Parsons' theory, then criticisms of this theory, and finally some research attempting to test the validity of some of his ideas.

Parsons argued that two sets of concepts are most important in helping us understand social stratification. In his first article on social stratification in 1940, Parsons (see 1964:70) wrote that "central for the purposes of this discussion is the differential evaluation in the moral sense of individuals as units." In his subsequent works on social stratification in 1949, 1953, and 1970, this theme was continued (see Parsons 1964, 1970). What Parsons meant by this, as in the Warner school, is that *status* or honor is the most important dimension of social stratification. People are evaluated and ranked by others in terms of how well they live up to the dominant values in the society, whatever these values may be. This means that there will always be a hierarchy of status honor in every society.

Parsons recognized wealth and power differences, of course, but for him these are by definition *secondary*. Writing of wealth, Parsons (1964:83) stated, "In spite of much opinion to the contrary, it is not a primary criterion, seen in terms of the common value system. . . its primary significance is a symbol of achievement." Parsons arrived at the same conclusion as Davis and Moore. But for Parsons the common value system helps ensure that the functionally most important roles are filled by competent people through their status striving.

In order to specify the placement of people in the stratification system, Parsons had to rank which roles or tasks are the most respected (to the least respected) in the society, which involved getting more specific about the dominant value system. Tackling this task, Parsons first offered his description of the four major **functional subsystems** within a society that are related to the four major **functional prerequisites** that all societies must meet if they are to survive. That is, all societies must solve problems of (1) *adaptation* of the environment, (2) *goal attainment*, (3) *integration*, and (4) *latent pattern maintenance* (or, for short, AGIL). The primary "concrete" institutions that usually perform these functional prerequisites for a society are, in order, the economy, the state, the legal system or sometimes religion, and the family, schools, and cultural institutions.

It will be helpful at this point to recall our earlier discussion of the organic analogy of society. Like body organs, each of these types of institutions is said to be serving a function for the health of the total organism—that is, society. For example, it is the task of economic institutions to extract resources from the environment and produce needed goods and services. The task of the state or polity is to define goals and provide direction toward these collective goals. Institutions such as law and religion help



provide integration of the social system through rules or moral standards. Finally, the family and institutions such as education perform pattern maintenance through training and socializing individual members of the society and serving their personal needs so that they can be functioning members of the society.

The importance of the preceding in understanding social stratification, Parsons claimed, is twofold: (1) The differing tasks of these various institutions lead them to stress differing values (or pattern variables). (2) Societies differ with respect to which of the four sets of institutions (adaptive, goal attainment, integration, or latent pattern maintenance) is primary. In a society where one set of institutions is primary (say, goal attainment or the polity), the common value system will be more heavily weighed toward the values most consistent with this institutional stress. *Thus*, the individuals who best live up to the values shaped by the primary institution or institutions will receive more status, as well as the secondary rewards that are tied to high status, like wealth.

Let us summarize these very abstract ideas:

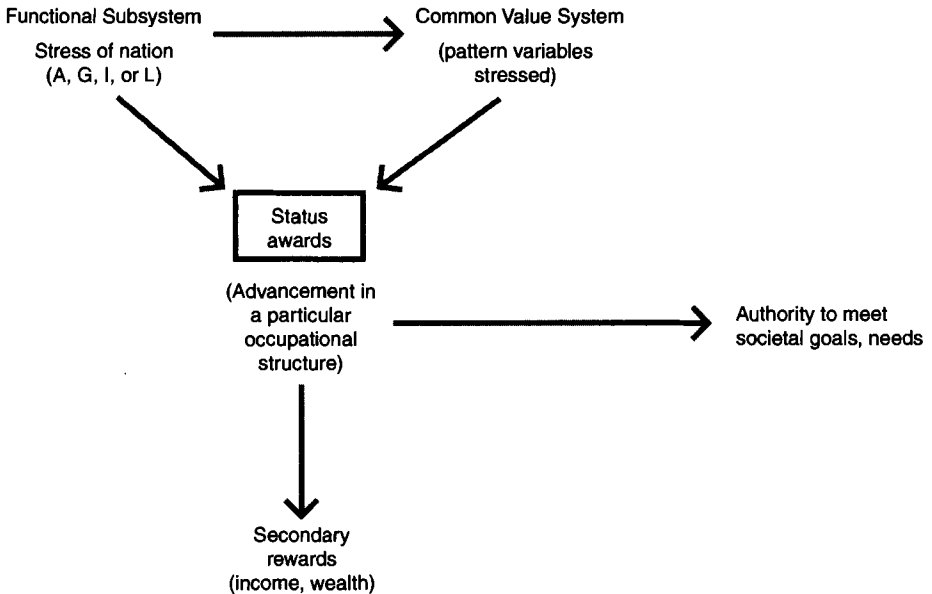
1. A person's place in the status hierarchy (stratification system) is determined by the moral evaluation of others.
2. This moral evaluation is made in terms of a common value system.
3. The common value system is shaped by the institution that is given primary stress in the society (the institutional stress coming from the particular historical and environmental circumstances of the society).
4. Thus, people who best live up to these values or ideas will receive, in addition to high status, other rewards, such as a high income and wealth.

It is also important to note that authority (or power) is attained through an individual's functional position in the occupational structure, which, of course, is gained through status attainment (see Figure 5-1).

We can now briefly consider what the preceding means for the U.S. stratification system. It is doubtful that anyone would disagree with Parsons' view that the adaptive subsystem (the economy) is given greatest stress in the United States. This means that the value system in this country is weighted toward performance in the occupational structure (Parsons 1951:399), and that people who meet the performance and achievement ideals in the economic occupational structure will be rewarded with greater status, advancement in the occupational structure, and the secondary rewards of wealth and high income.

By way of contrast, Parsons would argue that a country such as China today stresses goal attainment, or political institutions, over economic institutions (though, of course, China is trying to modernize through changing this). The values in China, following the stress on goal attainment or the polity, are weighted toward leadership ability and commitment to political ideals. The people who most typify these values would receive high status, advancement in the political bureaucracy, and secondary rewards such as wealth and high income. A similar description would be given for societies stressing, say, religious institutions and values (such as Iran since its revolution in 1979 or monks in the closed environment of a monastery).

Parsons' view does not contradict that of Davis and Moore. Only the stress on moral evaluation is different. Parsons still maintains that the most important positions



**FIGURE 5-1**  
Parsons' Theory of Social Stratification.

in the society will be most highly rewarded, with status first, and wealth as a secondary reward. What Parsons has done, however, is specify more clearly what the most important positions will be, given a particular institutional stress in the society.

**Critiques of Parsons** One does not need an empirical study to test Parsons' prediction that top business executives are most highly rewarded in the United States. Nor need we empirically examine the Chinese stratification system to find that top political elites are most rewarded. But one can certainly disagree with Parsons over *why* these people are on top of the stratification system in these countries. In other words, what Parsons leaves out of his analysis, or reduces to secondary importance, is a key to the critics' responses. And because Parsons clearly follows the functional tradition of Durkheim, most criticisms of Durkheim's view noted in the previous chapter apply equally to Parsons.

One of the most prominent criticisms of Parsons' work involves his assumption of a society with needs of its own. From this perspective, people in top institutional positions are doing what they do for the interests and needs of the total society. For Parsons, the interests of individuals and groups within the society are secondary. Like Durkheim, Parsons recognized class divisions, but again, these were seen as less important (Burger 1977).

Take the example of power. Parsons preferred the term *authority* because he viewed power and influence over others as something given to occupants of top institutional positions so that the interests and needs of the total society would be furthered (see Parsons 1964:327; 1960:181). Parsons rejected the notion that power is often used

to promote the interests of particular individuals or groups over others. One need only remember our review of history in Chapter 3 to see the problem with Parsons' assumptions about power.

Most enlightening in this respect was Parsons' reactions to C. Wright Mills's famous work *The Power Elite*. Parsons (1968:61) began his criticism of Mills's thesis (that there is a power elite that dominates the country in its own interests) by saying he had very few criticisms of fact, only of theoretical interpretation. In Parsons' (1968:82) view, "The essential point at present is that, to Mills, power is not a facility for the performance of function in, and on the behalf of, the society as a system, but is interpreted exclusively as a facility for getting what one group, the holders of power, wants by preventing another group, the 'outs,' from getting what it wants."

In other words, if you take away Parsons' assumptions that there is a social system with needs of its own and that actors in this system are working to fulfill society's needs rather than their own, Parsons' description of the U.S. stratification system is close to that in C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (Atkinson 1972:33). This also means that "what was a nightmare to C. Wright Mills, it seems, constitutes perfection of the social system to Talcott Parsons" (Strasser 1976:179).

This view of a society with needs of its own also helps us to understand Parsons' conceptual trick in defining wealth and high income as secondary rewards. Parsons could do this because he believed that people primarily seek status, therefore striving to live up to dominant values. By striving to live up to the dominant values—remembering that Parsons saw the values as shaped by the needs of society—people are serving the needs of society. Parsons did not see people as striving primarily for power and material wealth for *personal interests*. But even if status striving is primary, also neglected by Parsons is the idea that a common value system may be shaped by the interest of those in powerful, wealthy positions in the society.

Conflict theorists like Tumin (1953:393) point out that "social stratification systems function to provide the elite with the political power necessary to procure acceptance and dominance of an ideology which rationalizes the status quo, whatever this may be, as 'logical,' 'natural,' and 'morally right.'" An elite may legitimize its own high status through its influence over people's perspectives of what is to be valued. To the extent that this is the case, people may be given status and other rewards not because they meet the needs of the overall society but because they *serve the interests of elites in the society*. More detail on this process will be given in the chapter on legitimation.

Because status striving has a central position in Parsons' theory, we must examine this concept more fully. It will be remembered that in Weber's multidimensional view of stratification, status (honor or prestige) was only one dimension, to which Weber added class (or economic inequality) and power (or party). Weber viewed all three as important dimensions or divisions in a society, although in most of his work he tended to view power as increasingly primary in modern society. We must ask what the relationship is among all three of these dimensions. It will be instructive to return briefly to our earlier review of the history of inequality.

We found (following Lenski 1966, 1984) that in societies with a low level of technology and thus no or little surplus, goods were distributed on the basis of need. More importantly for our present discussion, we found hunting and gathering, or primitive

communal societies, for the most part to have no or few inequalities of wealth and power, but there were usually inequalities of status. Lenski argues that awards of status are based on how well someone serves the needs of the tribe. For example, when a tribe depends primarily on hunting for food, the best hunter is given respect or status by other members of the tribe. Thus, the data we have tend to support much of the functional explanation of stratification *with this type of human group*.

However, we saw that as the level of technology increased in human societies, so did the level of other types of inequality (for example, power and wealth). The best explanation seems to be that as some individuals or groups obtained the resources or means to dominate others—through control of the expanding surplus, free time, new weapons, and so on—they did so with the result of growing inequalities of power and wealth. Status inequalities, of course, continued. But from the conflict perspective the primary base of status had changed. As indicated in Figure 5-2, the primary base of status comes from power and economic dominance (see Lenski 1966:46, for a similar figure). Status as a route to power and economic rewards (the functionalist view) is considered in Figure 5-2 as secondary (as indicated by the broken line).

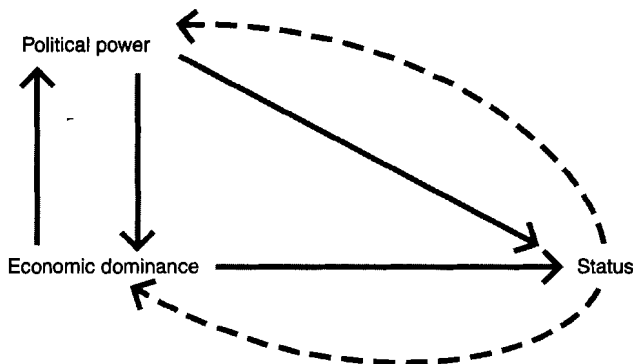
Conflict theorists, as indicated by Figure 5-2, do not discount the importance of status inequalities. Nor do they reject the possibility that at times and under special circumstances status inequality may be a primary dimension of social stratification. Let us turn to a special circumstance. A study by Della Fave and Hillery (1980) examined the stratification system in monasteries. The study was conducted using participant observation (over a seven-year period), with survey data also obtained from several monasteries across the United States. The value system of monasteries consciously restricts material inequalities, but power inequalities are also at a minimum. The nominal authority figure in the monastery, the abbot, was found in reality to have very little power, with the decision-making process typically democratic in practice.

But, as we would expect from the evaluating nature of human beings, Della Fave and Hillery did find inequalities of status. What accounts for these inequalities of status in the face of the egalitarian values of the monastery? The researchers found no relation

**FIGURE 5-2**

A Conflict View of Economic Dominance, Power, and Status.

Conflict theorists, of course, may disagree whether political power or economic dominance, or neither, is most important.



between the status ranking shown in questionnaire data and formal positions such as abbot, priest, or brother. Neither was there a relation between the status ranking and previous family background, or the differing economic tasks assigned the monks.

Most simply, the data showed the status ranking to be strongly related to personal qualities of individual monks; that is, those who typified or best lived up to the religious ideals received higher status. Della Fave and Hillery conclude, however, that Parsons' theory of social stratification has only limited value. Status inequalities are primary dimensions of stratification *only* when there is a small community that is *highly integrated* around a strong set of moral principles. Studies of the early Israeli kibbutzim, small rural communes of Jewish settlers, also support these conclusions (Rosenfeld 1951; Spiro 1970). We will see in a later chapter that Japan has a stratification system that seems to emphasize status-honor rewards more than other industrial societies. And we will also see that this is possible because of Japan's rather homogeneous population, making value consensus more extensive.

In conclusion, Parsons (1977:338) considered his theory to be analytic and not falsifiable. In other words, it is a guide to our understanding of phenomena such as social stratification, rather than a theory with specific hypotheses that can be tested empirically. For the most part Parsons is correct in this view. The theory is so abstract that it can be described more accurately as a paradigm.

But, as we have noted many times, an accumulation of empirical, historical, and other types of data and information can lead us to suggest that one abstract theory or paradigm is more useful or less useful in providing understanding of a particular subject matter such as social stratification. The ideas of Davis and Moore and Talcott Parsons reviewed here are not without value. Societies do, to some extent, operate in the manner described by these functional theorists. And much of the empirical research on social stratification uses the concept of occupational status, which comes from the functionalist perspective, though as we will see it can be used in altered form by conflict theories as well. But with this in mind we must consider the concept of occupational status before turning more generally to modern conflict theories of social stratification.

### **Studies of Occupational Prestige**

The vast majority of people in industrial societies depend on income from a job to meet their needs. That often makes the occupational structure the most visible form of stratification, in contrast to property relations or power differences. Functional theorists suggest that this visibility leads to extensive agreement among the population on relative ranks in the occupational structure, what they claim are ranks based on status or prestige. Let us examine the evidence.

In 1947 (North and Hatt 1947), 1963 (Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi 1964), 1971 (Siegel 1971), and then again in 1989 (Nakao and Treas 1990, 1994), similar studies were conducted to assess occupational prestige rankings in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In the 1989 study a total of 740 occupations were ranked by subjects in a national sample, with a focus on a core of 40 well-known occupations. The responses given by the national sample for each occupation were transformed into a ranking for each occupation that ranged from a possible high of 100 (all excellent responses) to a low of 0 (all poor responses).

Table 5-1 lists the rankings for a sample of forty occupations from the study conducted in 1989. At the top of this list is “department head in a state government,” which received a ranking of 76, with “filling station attendant” receiving the lowest rank (21). The occupation of physician received the highest ranking overall (86) but is not included in Table 5-1 because this occupation was not included in the list of occupations ranked by everyone in the national sample.

**TABLE 5-1**  
OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE SCORES IN THE UNITED STATES

Occupation	Prestige score
Department head in a state government	76
Lawyer	75
Chemist	73
Medical technician	68
Clergyman	67
Accountant	65
Public grade school teacher	64
Banker	63
General manager of a manufacturing plant	62
Musician in a symphony orchestra	59
Policeman	59
Superintendent of a construction job	57
Airplane mechanic	53
Farm owner and operator	53
Locomotive engineer	48
Manager of a supermarket	48
Insurance agent	46
Secretary	46
Bank teller	43
Welder	42
Post office clerk	42
Travel agent	41
Barber	36
Assembly line worker	35
Baker	35
Cook in a restaurant	34
Housekeeper in a private home	34
House painter	34
Shipping clerk	33
Cashier in a supermarket	33
Bus driver	32
Logger	31
Gardener	29
Lunchroom operator	27
Bartender	25
Bill collector	24
Saw sharpener	23
Janitor	22
Telephone solicitor	22
Filling station attendant	21

Source: Nakao and Treas (1994).

What is rather remarkable is that all three occupational prestige studies found very similar rankings by national samples. For example, there was a correlation of .96 to .97 (1.00 being a perfect correlation) between the 1963 and 1989 occupational rankings (Nakao and Treas 1994). There have been a few differences; for example, in 1947 only 49 percent of the respondents claimed to know what a nuclear physicist was, and it was ranked below seventeen other occupations. By 1963, 90 percent claimed to know what a nuclear physicist was, and only two occupations received a higher rating. In the 1989 study, service occupations in general had a relative increase in ranking, with professional positions remaining about the same compared with 1964. Again, however, the differences in order of rank were minor in all three studies.

There is other evidence of strong agreement on occupational rankings. Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi (1966) also compared the 1947 and 1963 national studies with more limited studies done in the United States in 1925 and 1940. Again strong consensus was found, with correlations of  $r = .93$  and  $r = .97$  to the 1963 study. Furthermore, Hodge, Treiman, and Rossi (1966) compared the 1963 national ranking with similar studies conducted in twenty-four other nations. Correlations to the 1963 U.S. study ranged from a low of  $r = .62$  with Poland to a high of  $r = .95$  with New Zealand. And a recent study has found similar occupational prestige rankings in urban China (Lin and Xie 1988). The most comprehensive comparison, however, was made by Treiman (1977), who was able to find extensive agreement on occupational prestige in sixty nations around the world. A reasonable conclusion from these various studies is that people do, in fact, agree widely on the relative standing of occupational positions in this society, as well as across most industrial nations. But we can question the reasons for such wide agreement on occupational ranks, and will do so after considering the development of stratification scales.

**Socioeconomic Status Scales** Given the importance of social stratification in understanding much of human behavior, and given functional theorists' stress on the occupational status dimension of social stratification, there was a clear need to devise simple and useful **socioeconomic status scales** for empirical research. Since the early history of American sociology, class position or socioeconomic status has been measured in a number of ways. One of the first measurements was developed by people from the ecological school. Focusing much of their research on the population of Chicago (the ecological school was dominated by sociologists at the University of Chicago), they employed a *residential approach*, with the assumption that people from different social classes live in different parts or zones of the city. Thus, a person's class position could be indicated by area or residence (see, for example, Zorbaugh 1929; Frazier 1932). There were obvious limitations to this approach. The correspondence between class and area of residence is not always close, and severe restrictions are placed on research conducted across several cities.

A new trend in class measurement began with Lloyd Warner's *Yankee City* studies. Focusing on small communities and using extensive observational techniques, Warner developed a *reputational method* of class identification. This method relied primarily upon the *status* judgments of people made by others in the community (see Warner 1953). From this method Warner concluded that there are six distinct class positions based on status.

The upper-upper class included rich and old, well-established families in the community. The lower-upper class included the new rich who did not yet have the respect and lifestyle of older rich families. The upper-middle class represented successful (but not rich) families in business and the professions. The lower-middle class was made up of the small business families and what we would call lower white-collar occupations (such as sales clerks and teachers). Those in the upper-lower class were strong, "moral" members of the community but were not economically well off. Finally, the lower-lower class included the poor and unemployed, with "low moral standards," who were looked down upon by those in the community.

Besides the fact that this technique of class measurement employed by Warner is time-consuming and would be difficult to use with studies examining stratification in more than one small community, there are other problems. One of the most critical is that studies of other communities using the same technique have found differing numbers of class positions (see Lynd and Lynd 1929, 1937; West 1945; and Hollingshead 1949). And, of course, there is the problem of basing class position exclusively on status judgments as described in the preceding chapter.

A breakthrough in class or prestige measurement came with the first study of occupational prestige in 1947. However, a problem remained; rankings were obtained for only ninety occupations. If this ranking was to be widely useful for studies of social stratification, it had to be extended. The problem was solved in part with the development of *Duncan's Socioeconomic Index* (see Reiss et al. 1961). This SEI scale was constructed by weighting a person's educational level and income so that a ranking of occupations could be made resembling that found in the 1947 occupational prestige study. The method was then able to expand the original 90 occupations ranked in 1947 to a set of 425 occupations.

An even simpler method of measuring socioeconomic status (though with less direct relation to the occupational prestige studies) was developed by Hollingshead (see Hollingshead and Redlich 1958; Miller 1977:230). Referred to as *Hollingshead's Two Factor Index of Social Position*, this scale gives differing weight to a respondent's type of occupation (from a simpler listing of occupations) and educational level to indicate a respondent's class position.

Both of these scales are now used widely and have become standard methods of measuring social class in studies of the relationship between social stratification and such factors as attitudes, political behavior, psychological conditions, sexual behavior, and deviance (see Miller 1977:215–216, 231–233, for a listing of these early studies). In fact, it was not until these scales were developed that extensive empirical research in social stratification emerged. These scales are based primarily on the underlying assumption that prestige is the most important aspect of divisions in the occupational structure. The problem with this prestige or status assumption will be described later. However, the prestige assumption is not necessary, and the scales remain a useful tool in stratification research no matter which theoretical perspective is accepted.

**Critique of Occupation as a Status Hierarchy** Studies of occupational prestige demonstrate a high rate of agreement in this country and in others on the relative rankings of different occupations. But do these studies show that the agreement is based on



status or prestige rather than on other factors related to an occupation? One study (Balkwell, Bates, and Garbin 1980) showed that people carry in their minds similar concepts of occupational ranks, although there is no doubt that people judge many factors about an occupation when ranking occupations (see Baker 1977).

Conflict theorists claim these rankings are made by people in terms of the income and power of the occupation ranked, with status factors secondary (see Gusfield and Schwartz 1963; Lenski 1966:431). Functional theorists seem to have ignored the fact that when respondents in the original 1947 study were asked why they rated an occupation high, the most important reason listed was that "the job pays well" (see Heller 1969:120).

Studies have indicated that occupational status research has not adequately recognized the class differences in ranking occupations (Guppy 1982; Coxon, Davies, and Jones 1986). One study has shown that there is significant disagreement when people of different classes, races, and educational levels are asked to rank occupations (Guppy and Goyder 1984). And it seems that education is one of the most important factors leading raters to agree or disagree on the level of status for particular occupations. The higher the level of education of the raters, the greater their agreement, indicating that learning is perhaps leading to similar ratings. And, finally, Hope (1982) has presented data indicating that the economic rewards of the occupation are as important as the social importance of the occupation in the minds of raters when they rate an occupation as high or low in status.

Other conflict theorists argue that even to the extent that prestige or status is a factor in making such occupational rankings, a person's concept of which jobs are more important and honorable can be influenced by inequalities of power. For example, status judgments can be shaped by (1) the ability of those high in the stratification system to obtain higher income because of their power, and reward with higher income those occupations serving elite interests (income is related to prestige judgments, remember); and (2) the ability of elites to influence what we think about different occupations through their influence over the dominant values in the society (see Kerbo 1976a). There is some support for both arguments in the cross-national prestige comparisons. It was noted earlier that Hodge, Treiman, and Rossi (1966) found much agreement on cross-national studies of occupational prestige. But there was some variation, with least agreement found between Poland (then a communist country) and the United States (see endnote 1).

We can conclude that continuous occupational divisions do exist in industrial societies, and that people in these societies have a remarkably similar conception of these occupational rankings. We must question, however, the degree to which these occupational divisions are based on status or prestige, rather than on economic market forces (many of them not free-market competition). The status dimension can be very important in small communities (as we saw with Warner's studies, and studies of the kibbutzim and monasteries). But the information we have examined and will examine later suggests that with the occupational structure, occupational skill level, income, and power in the marketplace (as Weber described) are most important in affecting life chances.

**TABLE 5-2**  
**CLASS, STATUS, AND POWER DIMENSIONS STRESSED IN STRATIFICATION PARADIGMS**

		Value assumptions	
		Critical	Uncritical
<b>Model assumptions</b>	Order	Empty with modern theories	Functional theory <b>Status-honor</b> (and occupational status)
	Conflict	Ruling-class theory <b>Class</b>	Power-conflict theory <b>Power</b>

## CONFLICT THEORIES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The main tasks of this section will be to (1) outline briefly recent additions to Marxian theory, (2) examine some uncritical-conflict theories (primarily that of Dahrendorf), and (3) provide a general description of the main components of conflict theories (of all types) most useful for understanding the nature of inequality and social stratification in the advanced industrial societies. We can begin by noting some of the main differences between the two conflict paradigms (and the functional paradigm as well), along with the dimension of social stratification stressed by each. From Weber's influential description of stratification systems we recognize the primary dimensions of class, status, and party (or power).

What is interesting about theories of stratification is that there has been a tendency for theorists to stress one of these dimensions most heavily (see Table 5-2). Theories from the uncritical-conflict paradigm have tended to stress *power* or party as the main dimension of social stratification. For example, these theories focus attention on political power or formalized bureaucratic power and authority (as did Weber) in explaining the nature of inequality and social stratification in industrial societies.

Theories from the critical-conflict paradigm have tended to stress Marx's view of economic or property relations, that is, *class* as the most important dimension. And following our discussion of functional theories, we can see that these theorists have stressed Weber's *status* dimension.

Although functional theorists have also stressed the importance of an occupational structure (the other part of Weber's class dimension) in the nature of inequality and social stratification (especially the Davis and Moore theory), at the base of this occupational structure they stress *status* divisions (as we saw especially with Parsons' theory).

In part, a reason for this difference in stress on the various dimensions of stratification can be found in the divergent paradigm assumptions outlined in Chapter 4. Critical conflict theorists assume that inequality can be significantly reduced and that the major source of inequality in our society is related to the historical development of property relations. If inequality is to be reduced, it must be based on changing property or class relations, rather than on a more general conflict of interests "always found" among human beings.

Uncritical-conflict theorists, in contrast, tend to view inequality and social stratification as based on differing human and group interests in a more general sense. Although not always explicitly stressing this conflict of interests as related to selfish human nature, they assume that some kinds of interests will always be in conflict. In complex societies, therefore, these differing group interests will be reflected in organized power structures (or bureaucratic or political organizations) that are generalized means of furthering group interests of any type.

Uncritical-order or functional theorists maintain that inequality will always be present, but they tend to stress the needs of complex human organizations as the reason for this inequality. Thus, it is the status structure that helps provide social order and results in unequal status ranking in relation to the functional division of labor (or occupational structure necessary in complex societies) that explains social stratification and inequality.

### **Modern Marxian Theory**

We can begin by stating that modern Marxian theorists continue to accept Marx's basic view of social stratification outlined in Chapter 4. We need not repeat that basic outline. The primary concern of modern Marxian theorists has been to apply this Marxian view of society to industrial societies that have experienced change since Marx's time, while also using new methods of social science research to validate some of the principal Marxian concepts. We will consider first the changes in industrial societies that produce apparent problems for Marxian theory. We can approach these changes by focusing on some of the main problems faced by Marxian analysis today.

Among these problems, by far the most serious is the absence of socialist revolutions in any of the advanced capitalist nations. In fact, the working class that was seen by Marx as making such a revolution has become, it seems, less class-conscious and less critical of capitalism since Marx's time. Related to this, capitalist nations have not experienced the crisis periods Marx saw as leading to revolution, or, to the extent that they have experienced such crisis periods, the crisis has so far been managed with less than revolutionary results.

It will be remembered that Marx predicted increasing monopoly capitalism with a more powerful upper class in control of the economy and nation. Something like monopoly capitalism has certainly developed, as we will see in chapters on the upper classes that follow. But many argue, with some convincing evidence, that an upper class in the traditional sense of wealthy families with ownership of the major means of production in the society no longer exists, or, if it does, it has much less ownership and power.

In addition, we find a relative reduction in traditional working-class occupations in advanced capitalist societies and the emergence of a new middle class (especially what we call an upper middle class) to an extent Marx did not predict (Wright 1997; Wright and Martin 1987). Finally, there is a serious problem with respect to the reality of communism in nations that once claimed to be communist. Part of the problem is that nations like Russia and China did not develop "communism" from the breakdown of advanced capitalist nations as Marx predicted. Furthermore, we should add, the communist nations that have existed were far from the ideal that Marx envisioned, even after Gorbachev's reforms and democracy in the old Soviet Union.

In the face of these problems, many theorists point out that Marx cannot be held responsible for failure to predict the future in every respect. They also note, with some validity, that Marx was not concerned with formulating exact universal laws, only historical tendencies (see Wright 1997; Appelbaum 1978a, 1978b). The basic Marxian view of society, they claim, must not be considered a deterministic model of society but a guide to our thinking. As we noted in our earlier discussion of Marx, recent Marxian theorists are correct in stating that the political and deterministic-materialistic Marx has been overly stressed in the past. Nevertheless, some specific predictions in Marxian theory have been shown to be incorrect. How are these incorrect predictions dealt with?

With respect to the first major problem, that of no socialist revolution in advanced capitalist nations and little revolutionary consciousness among the working class, some argue that Marx was simply inaccurate in timing. The revolution will come, sooner or later. But even if this is true, it begs the question of why it has taken so long. The Marxian response to this question can be combined with the response to the second question noted previously: Why has there been no major crisis in capitalist societies, or why have such crisis periods been managed without revolutionary changes? Two general factors are presented to account for these original inaccuracies in Marxian theory: (1) *the growth and strength of the state* and (2) *unforeseen influences on the working class*.

There has been much recent work by Marxian theorists to correct Marx's neglect of the function of the state in capitalist societies by adding Weber's insights (Miliband 1969, 1977; Harrington 1976; Therborn 1978; Wright 1997). Another group of structural Marxists even argues that a strong state has developed in capitalist societies with *some* autonomy from upper-class interests (Skocpol 1979, 1992; Althusser 1969, 1977; Poulantzas 1973, 1975; see Domhoff 2002). This strong state so far has been able to manage the *collective* interests of the bourgeoisie (upper class) to prevent crisis, and has managed crisis periods to prevent revolutionary changes. This is done through (1) economic planning and control of conditions (such as a failing profit rate, inflation, reduced demand for goods produced) that could produce crisis, (2) welfare spending to control and appease the poor and unemployed during hard times, and (3) the management of conflicts within the bourgeoisie that could result in economic crisis (such as government regulation preventing competition from getting out of hand and destroying some corporations). In other words, rather than being almost a captive of upper-class capitalists, the state is now viewed by recent Marxian theorists as somewhat autonomous and managing the economy for overall upper-class interests.

In addition to describing how the working class has been pacified by welfare state reforms, modern Marxians cite other factors as reducing revolutionary class consciousness among the working class (see primarily Herman and Chomsky 1988; Marcuse 1964; Miliband 1969; Aronowitz 1974; Piven and Cloward 1971, 1982, 1988). First of all, labor unions are seen as making some material gains for the workers, but at the expense of controlling the working class for long-term capitalist interests. In what is called *institutionalization of class conflict*, elites in big labor unions are seen as working for capitalist interests by controlling strikes and preventing workers from considering more threatening issues such as worker influence over corporate decision making.

Second, with respect to material gains, the high standard of living achieved by the working class in advanced capitalist nations is seen as co-opting labor. A consumption orientation among workers, promoted by the higher standard of living and mass advertising, was never foreseen by Marx. An outcome has been a willingness on the part of workers to support the basic capitalist system and tolerate alienating working conditions as long as they can share in the material fruits of capitalism (such as cars, boats, campers, and motorcycles).

A third factor often cited for the absence of revolutionary class consciousness is the strength of the legitimation process in advanced capitalist nations (Habermas 1975, 1984; Herman and Chomsky 1988). As noted previously, every stratification system must convince those toward the bottom of this system that their low position is somehow justified. The effects of a mass media unimagined in Marx's day, among other factors such as education (to be described in our later chapter on this process), are cited by Marxian theorists as helping to produce acceptance of the capitalist system by the general population (Kellner 1990).

The expansion of the white-collar class of technical, sales, clerical, service, and bureaucratic workers is also acknowledged by many as unforeseen by Marx. But some Marxian theorists see no serious problem for Marxian theory: This middle class is simply defined as part of the working class, although serving a different role in the capitalist system (Anderson 1974). More recently, however, the prediction that the growing middle-class jobs have been "deskilled," making them like working-class jobs (Wright et al. 1982), has been refuted empirically (Wright 1997; Wright and Martin 1987). There are, in fact, more middle-class jobs that cannot be defined away as "really" working-class jobs. Wright and Martin (1987) argue that this goes against Marxian predictions but can still be explained in a Marxian framework. What Marx failed to see was that capitalism has become more international, with working-class labor growing and conditions for the working class becoming worse as these types of jobs are exported by the rich capitalist nations to poor countries.

The growth of the middle class and upper middle class in advanced capitalist nations is also seen as posing another problem for the Marxian prediction of increasing criticism and opposition to the capitalist class in the population. This new middle class is usually rather conservative politically (see Mills 1953 for an excellent analysis), promoting divisions among nonowners below the rank of capitalist class. The divisions are produced because (1) white-collar workers generally have higher status (if not more pay), leading to status divisions; (2) white-collar workers (because of more interaction with capitalists and their managers) tend to identify more with capitalist interests; and (3) the expansion of the occupational structure (more ranks from top to bottom) has promoted more social mobility. In addition to creating more divisions in the working class, the expansion of the occupational structure and the hope of social mobility have reduced class consciousness because of the possibility of escape from "alienating" and low-status blue-collar work.

Finally, more Marxian theorists now agree that the Soviet Union had created a form of state communism (some say state capitalism) far from what Marx predicted. A new class of party bureaucrats took power in the name of the working class, but rather than working for the working class, this new class was "exploitative in the exact sense that Marx gave the term—the workers and peasants were forced to surrender a surplus to the bureaucracy" (Harrington 1976:50).

Generally, the problem with Marxian theory in this respect is that Marx failed to understand the state as a generalized power structure, a power structure that can serve the particular interests of capitalists as well as the narrow interests of some other type of elite (as Weber understood; see Wright 1978a:213). Some argue that a new class of party bureaucrats emerged in the Soviet Union because that country experienced a premature communist revolution. (In 1917 Russia was not an advanced capitalist nation with a strong working class that had sufficient power to maintain its class interests.) But most also agree that Marxian theorists must understand political structures better to prevent the type of bureaucratic dominance that developed in the old Soviet Union (Wright 1978a:219).

In conclusion, it must be stressed that the preceding is not exhaustive of all the problems recent theorists have recognized in Marx's original work, nor do all Marxian theorists today agree on all the points we have described. But this is a fair sampling of some of the main problems found in Marx's work and of how recent Marxian writers have attempted to deal with these problems. For our concern, the main point is this: Marxian theorists continue to follow the basic guidelines of Marx's theoretical work. With some revision, they find this general theory useful in understanding most aspects of contemporary stratification systems.

**Recent Empirical Work and Wright's Class Categories** Of course, one may well disagree that current Marxian theory is a useful guide to understanding most aspects of modern stratification systems. A clear problem remains: Marx's writings were at times ambiguous and contradictory. Even today there is much disagreement over what Marx really meant, and almost any criticism can be deflected by Marxists with one or another interpretation of the "true" Marx (a situation not unlike that in functionalism). Until more aspects of Marxian theory are examined empirically and the theory is further refined, problems will remain.

Most recently, however, some interesting empirical research from a Marxian perspective has been attempted with success. The most impressive of these attempts has been Erik O. Wright's empirical work on Marxian class categories (1978a, 1978b, 1997; Wright and Perrone 1977; Wright et al. 1982; Wright and Martin 1987). By following Marx's idea that class must be defined in relation to the productive system in the society (that is, by one's relation to the means of production), rather than simply occupational status levels, as functionalists suggest, Wright has developed a four-class model. With this four-class model Wright is able to show the usefulness of the Marxian view of class and to explain some of the problems found with functional views of occupational categories.

Defining class in relation to the productive system, we have what Wright calls capitalists, managers, workers, and the petty bourgeoisie. Capitalists own the means of production (factories, banks, and so on), purchase the labor of others, and control the labor of others. Managers merely control the labor of others for capitalists and sell their labor to capitalists (such as managers of corporations). Workers, of course, have only their labor to sell to capitalists, while the petty bourgeoisie own some small means of production but employ very few or no workers. (This includes, for example, small shop or store owners.) What does this Marxian concept of class help us understand?

Most previous empirical research in social stratification has been done from the functional perspective. Class positions or, more accurately, occupational status positions, are viewed by functionalists as skill and status rankings on a continuum from lowest to highest. Pay, status, and educational levels are all assumed to roughly follow this continuum. In other words, functionalists do not consider class divisions, but rather rankings, as on a ladder. However, these previous functional studies have many problems. For one, research shows no simple relation between these occupational grades and income. Another problem is that education level does not predict income very well (see Jencks et al. 1972 on these problems).

Research by Wright and Perrone (1977) and Wright (1978b, 1997) has produced some interesting findings using the Marxian class categories. With national samples of people in the labor force, Wright's research found class position (the four categories described earlier) to be about as good in explaining differences in income between people as are occupational status and educational level. It is also interesting that capitalists have higher incomes, even controlling for (or eliminating) the effects on income from educational level, occupational skill, age, and job tenure. In other words, being a capitalist, and especially a big capitalist, irrespective of other factors such as education and occupational skill, brings more income (see also Aldrich and Weiss 1981).

There are other interesting findings. For example, education does *not* on the average help workers attain a higher income, but more education does bring more income for the managerial class. And, examining people *within* class categories, there is not much difference between males and females, and blacks and whites on income. The male-female and black-white overall income differences (males and whites have higher incomes) are due primarily to *class position*. That is, females and blacks have lower average incomes because they are proportionately more often than white males to be in the *working class* (as defined by Wright).

A study by Robinson and Kelley (1979) attained similar results using national samples from the United States and England. These researchers also found separate mobility patterns in terms of class position and occupational status. To attain a capitalist class position, it is best to be born of capitalist parents; to attain a high occupational position, it is best to be born of parents with high education and high occupational position.

What all this means is that a person's relation to the productive system, or means of production, does make a difference that has been ignored by most social scientists in the past. Considered another way, however, this research shows that class position defined in Marxian terms does not explain everything about social mobility and income attainment and that Marxian theory alone does not tell us all we need to know about social stratification. We will return to this theme at the end of this chapter.

Let us conclude our discussion by noting a final criticism that brings us to the next group of conflict theories. Perhaps the most important weakness of Marxian theory is the assumption that class or economic conflicts are the only conflicts of interest among people or groups, or at least the most important conflicts. It is because of this assumption that Marxian theorists can foresee equality and harmony (no conflict) when the private ownership of productive forces (capital, factories, and so on) is eliminated.

History, at least so far, and except for small, exceptional human groups, suggests this assumption is incorrect. Inequality may be reduced to a degree with the elimination of private ownership of productive forces but there are other interests in conflict, and other conflict groups in modern societies.

### Power Conflict Theories

Other conflict theories of social stratification follow what we have described as an uncritical-conflict paradigm. Most importantly, these theories view conflict as a more pervasive aspect of human beings and human societies, a condition not restricted to economic relations. As Dahrendorf (1959:208) puts it, "It appears that not only in social life, but wherever there is life, there is conflict." Or as Collins (1975:59) tells us, "For conflict theory, the basic insight is that human beings are sociable but conflict-prone animals."

The label "uncritical-conflict theorist" is a bit unfair. We are *not* saying that these theorists are often uncritical of exploitation and inequality, or unsympathetic toward those at the bottom of the stratification system. But these theorists agree that conflict and exploitation, in one form or another and to some degree, will always be found among human beings and in human societies. It is only from this understanding of the conflict in all societies, they argue, that we can ever learn to deal with, and perhaps reduce, inequality and exploitation. Like Weber, however, they tend to be pessimistic about this possibility.

Aside from telling us about the conflict nature of human beings and human societies, what, specifically, does this type of conflict theory have to say about social stratification? Beginning from the assumption that people have conflicting interests of many types, they suggest that a more general view of power and conflict is needed to understand social stratification. Power may be defined in many ways, but most broadly it means the ability to compel (through force, rewards, or other means) another individual to do what you want, or to give you what you want, even when it is against the other person's interests to do so. Whatever the means of power (economic, political, military, and so on), it is a generalized commodity that can serve many interests or goals. Furthermore, if one wants to understand a widespread social arrangement such as social stratification, it must be recognized that collectives of individuals can have common interests and work together to meet these common interests. Thus, to understand a *system* of social stratification, we must understand organized class or group interests, rather than random individual conflicts.

**Dahrendorf's Conflict Theory** One of the most influential conflict theories of social stratification is that of Ralf Dahrendorf (1959). He begins his theory by describing the strong and weak points of Marxian theory, then adds to Marx's strong points what he sees as the strong points of Weber's work. In his review of Marx, Dahrendorf agrees that societies must be viewed from the perspective of conflict and differing interests. Furthermore, he believes that Marx was correct to focus on both organized (or manifest) and unorganized (or latent) *group* interests to understand the more fundamental aspects of social stratification.



In other words, the social scientist must understand not just the organized and manifest group conflicts but also the manner in which group or class interests are distributed in a society and whether or not a particular group or class recognizes its latent group interests and acts upon these interests. The potential for these latent group interests to become manifest is always present. Finally, Dahrendorf accepts Marx's primary *two-class model*. There are always, from his perspective, superordinate and subordinate classes.

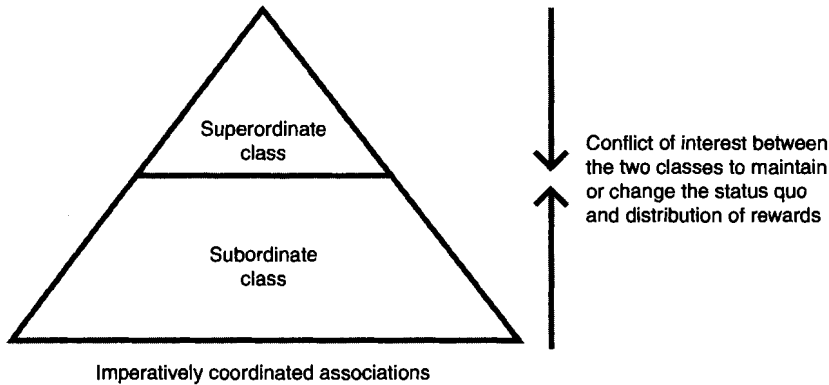
Dahrendorf rejects Marx on other points. For example, he disagrees that revolution will destroy class conflict; class or group conflict is an inevitable aspect of organized societies. Perhaps most importantly, Dahrendorf rejects Marx's view that class conflict in advanced industrial society is based primarily or only on economic interests. He supports his rejection of Marx on this point by arguing that an upper class no longer owns and controls the means of production. Rather, he accepts the managerial control thesis (discussed here in Chapters 6 and 7) that control is divorced from ownership, with nonowning managers controlling the economy. In addition, Dahrendorf believes that the growth of a middle class in industrial societies also has altered the nature of economic divisions as described by Marx.

So where does Dahrendorf locate the basis of class conflict, if not in economic interests defined by Marx? It is at this point that he adds Weber's insights. All industrial or complex societies must have some forms of social organization, what Weber called **imperatively coordinated associations**. These imperatively coordinated associations are like bureaucratic organizations centered around major tasks in the society. They are found in business, government, labor unions, universities, charitable organizations—that is, in all organized social structures. And within these imperatively coordinated associations, differing roles or positions are filled by individuals.

Thus, because these imperatively coordinated associations are so pervasive in society, individual and group *interests* are structured by the individual or group relationships to these associations. Within all imperatively coordinated associations there are authority roles of domination and subordination. As Dahrendorf (1959:165) writes, "One of the central theses of this study consists in the assumption that this differential distribution of authority invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflicts of a type that is germane to class conflicts in the traditional (Marxian) sense of this term."

Unlike Marx, Dahrendorf recognizes all kinds of individual or group interests. There are interests in obtaining more material rewards, freedom, status recognition, leisure, all kinds of services from others, and so on. But the main point is that the *means* to attaining these interests are related to authority positions within imperatively coordinated associations. In other words, the *haves* get what they want because they are on top in the association, while the *have-nots* find it in their interests to challenge the status quo that assigns them low positions and low rewards (Dahrendorf 1959:176).

Figure 5-3 roughly summarizes Dahrendorf's conflict theory. It is important to recognize that Dahrendorf is referring to imperatively coordinated associations of all sizes, performing all kinds of tasks. It is also important to recognize that individuals have a position in many of these associations at the same time. For example, someone has a position in relation to the government (a political elite or just a citizen), the over-



**FIGURE 5-3**  
Dahrendorf's Conflict Theory.

all economy (a corporate executive, or, say, a consumer), his or her occupation (manager or worker), as well as some other associations such as a church (high church official or simple member) or university (president or student). Each of these positions represents a different set of interests in relation to the authority or lack of authority maintained. These interests are only latent interests held in common (such as manager versus worker interests) until they become recognized and acted upon by the opposed interest groups (manifest interests).

**Summary and Critiques of Power Conflict Theories** Although attention has been focused on Dahrendorf's theory of social stratification, there are other theories that generally fit within the uncritical-conflict paradigm. In most respects, Lenski's (1966, 1984) theory, discussed briefly in Chapter 3, is in this category. We say "in most respects" because with hunting and gathering societies and industrial societies Lenski reverts to a few functional assumptions in explaining social stratification.

Randall Collins (1975) has also constructed a conflict theory based on various conflicting interests. Especially interesting and useful with Collins's theory is that he combines microlevel (individual or small-group level) analysis from social interaction theorists such as Goffman (1959) and Garfinkel (1967) with macrolevel analysis. More than other theories, Collins's work is devoted to explaining all types of human behavior (such as family relations, social interaction, and conversation) that is influenced by a system of social stratification.

Another important theorist to mention is Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist who became respected in the United States in the 1990s as he had been in France for some time. (His death in 2002 made the front pages of most respected French newspapers.) Bourdieu's style of conflict theory has similarities to that of Collins in that Bourdieu tried to combine the macro- and microlevels of analysis, especially in how individuals make sense of the world in which they live (Bourdieu 1993). But from a structuralist tradition, Bourdieu also recognized how these meanings people have of the world are shaped or limited from objective structures in the society. In social stratification, for example, Bourdieu recognized that economic class positions that individuals hold

shape their world views and also what is usually called culture. Thus, Bourdieu's work is very useful in helping us understand how "class subcultures" are shaped and thus how people in different class positions can have different tastes, lifestyles, and even values preferences (1984, 1996). Through differing class subcultures people of different classes tend to draw lines around their class "ingroup" and the "out-group" of people in other class positions. Thus, people in higher-class positions come to define those of lower-class positions as different and perhaps not as capable of fitting into higher positions in the class system. One can say that from this perspective, "people compete about culture and they compete with it" (Jenkins 1992:128). As we will see in our chapter on social mobility, this perspective has contributed much to our understanding of how social mobility might be restricted or enhanced by how people in higher-class positions (as teachers with lower-class children) evaluate others in terms of their knowledge of "higher culture."

We do not have the space to consider all the differences and particular characteristics of the various power conflict theories, but we should summarize their common principles. They all begin from the assumptions that (1) theories of social stratification must be grounded in differing individual and group interests, (2) which are varied, and (3) form the basis of class conflict. Most important is how groups come together within organized social structures (what Dahrendorf calls imperatively coordinated associations) that form systems of social stratification.

Most criticisms of this general type of conflict theory are related to the assumptions held by other theorists. For example, functionalists charge that individuals primarily seek status in terms of a common value system, which in turn leads people to ensure that needs of the social system are met. Critical-conflict theorists, of course, tend to stress economic relations as primary.

But focusing on Dahrendorf's theory reveals more serious criticisms involving his very general treatment of imperatively coordinated associations. It may be agreed that these are all structures of hierarchical authority relations, with some people having more authority than others. But considering cross-national and cross-historical comparisons, surely some imperatively coordinated associations are at times more important within a nation than others (Giddens 1973:73). This is not the same as the Marxist critique, because it may be that in some nations economic associations are primary, while in others political, religious, military, or other associations may be more important in the overall stratification system.

Also, with Dahrendorf's theory, how do we decide who is in which of the two classes? At times this is a simple matter. At General Motors the board of directors belongs to the superordinate class, while a worker on the assembly line is in the subordinate class. But what about engineers, lesser managers, line supervisors? In other words, where do we draw the line between the two classes? Dahrendorf could respond that it depends on the particular interests that are in conflict. This response, however, is too arbitrary. There are degrees of authority, but recognizing this makes the theory much more complex and at times confusing.

Before concluding, let us consider some relevant and interesting empirical studies on this issue. Robinson and Kelley's (1979) study was mentioned earlier in relation to Marxian class categories, but it also attempted to measure and test some of Dahren-

dorf's views of class (see also Robinson and Garnier 1985). The capitalist class (in a Marxian sense) was defined and measured as those who own or control the means of production, while Dahrendorf's class categories were measured in terms of *degrees* of authority (noting the earlier criticism). Robinson and Kelley measured degrees of authority by how many levels of employees were above and below the individual. As a third definition of ranking they measured the usual occupational status or skill levels. Their data consisted of national samples of employed people in England and the United States.

Robinson and Kelley correlated these differing measures of class and occupational status with three main dependent variables. They found (1) that all three class/occupational measures did about equally well in explaining income differences among individuals in their sample; (2) that all three class/occupational measures helped explain differing class identification in the sample (for example, whether people saw themselves in the upper class, middle class, or working class); and (3) that all three class/occupational measures were related to differing political party voting (that is, voting Democrat or Republican in the United States), except for class position (in Dahrendorf's terms) in the United States.

Finally, as discussed in part earlier, their findings show that there are distinct lines of class and occupational attainment. For example, having a father with a high class position, in either Marx's or Dahrendorf's definition of class, will provide a better chance for the son to attain the high class position also. At the same time, having a father with a high occupational position as defined by status and skill level will provide a better chance for the son to attain the high occupational position also. But the processes are not strongly related. That is, having a father with a high *occupational* status position will not be of much help for the son in attaining a high *class* position (defined in either of the two ways), and vice versa.

Kalleberg and Griffin (1980) examined the effects of bureaucratic power divisions on income and job fulfillment. In this study they were concerned with bureaucratic authority divisions in both capitalist sector organizations (corporations) and noncapitalist organizations (such as government agencies and educational and civic organizations). To measure bureaucratic authority divisions Kalleberg and Griffin (1980:737) asked two questions of respondents in their sample: (1) Are they self-employed? (2) Do they supervise anyone as part of their job? "Individuals who responded 'yes' to both were defined as *employers*. Individuals who responded 'no' to both were defined as *workers*. *Managers* were those who responded 'no' to the first and 'yes' to the second."

The researchers admit that this is a very rough measurement of authority divisions, and their findings are probably weaker than if more precise measures were possible. It may also be added that degrees of authority are missed in these measures. But the findings are significant; there were clear income differences between these divisions, even after controlling for the influence on income from job tenure, work experience, educational level, occupational skill level, and mental ability. And although the income of people in capitalist sector organizations was greater, the income differences in relation to authority divisions were significant in both capitalist and noncapitalist sectors examined separately. Finally, the higher the position in the authority structure, the greater the job fulfillment claimed.

Thus, in addition to having some analytic value, Dahrendorf's class theory receives some empirical support. But as we noted in our discussion of recent Marxian theorists, Dahrendorf's theory does not tell us all we need to know about social stratification. We will return to this theme in our concluding section after we examine some relevant information from sociobiology.

### Modern World System Theory

Over the last couple of decades it has become clear that one of the most important new theories related to social stratification comes under the general title of the **modern world system** theory. As we have seen to some extent already in the previous pages of this book, and as we will see to a much greater extent in coming pages, no clear understanding of social stratification in the United States or any other country can now be achieved without reference to the effects of the modern world system. The growing income inequality in the United States, the growing class conflict in Europe over changes in class relations and rewards, the Asian economic crisis beginning in 1997 (earlier for Japan), to name just a few topics, must be considered in relation to changes in the modern world system. We must also include major world events, such as colonialism, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, along with all of the events and conditions these world-shaping events caused, as related to changes in the modern world system.

Because of its importance we will examine world system theory more extensively in the beginning of Chapter 14 on "The World Stratification System" and at that point consider the works of people such as Wallerstein (1974, 1977, 1980, 1989, 1999), Frank (1969, 1975, 1978, 1998), Bornschieer (1995), Chase-Dunn (1989), and Chirot (1986). In summary, the basic point of the modern world system theory is that from about 1500 A.D. when the new modern world system began, nations have been in competition with each other for dominance over other nations, especially with respect to economic domination. **Core nations** are the richer nations on top of the modern world system, with **semiperiphery** and **periphery nations** in lower ranks in this system, much like middle class, working class, and the poor in an internal stratification system. As the previous description suggests, modern world system theory is a form of conflict theory, often considered to be a variety of neo-Marxian theory (Ritzer 1992), though as we will see in Chapter 14, certainly not all theorists in this area could be considered Marxist. But it is certainly a form of conflict theory that has many parallels to conflict theories that help us understand class conflicts and inequalities within countries such as the United States.

### THE BASES OF CLASS STRATIFICATION AND CLASS LOCATION

Considering the theoretical controversies in the study of social stratification, a controversy might be anticipated over how class can be defined most meaningfully as well. In large measure the controversy follows the theoretical debates (functional versus conflict theories) over which dimension of social stratification is most important (Weber's class, status, or power). Other assumptions, however, are also involved in the debate over the most useful conceptualization of class.

Dennis Wrong (1959, 1964), for example, outlines what he calls **realist** versus **nominalist** definitions of class. As Kingston's (2000) recent attempt at revival shows, the realist places emphasis on clear class boundaries—people identifying themselves as members of a particular class and interacting most with others in the same class; in other words, forming distinct social groupings based on class divisions. For the nominalist, most important are the common characteristics groups of people may have that influence their life chances and share of valued rewards in the society, such as education level, occupational position, or bureaucratic power position. People are then placed in class categories in terms of these common characteristics, whether or not they are aware of these characteristics and associate with others in the same class.

Similar to the preceding are **subjective** versus **objective** definitions of class. With the subjective view the emphasis is on whether class has meaning to the people said to be in a particular class, while the objective view stresses particular life chances or economic characteristics people may have in common. Some theorists use the term *class* to cover both views, reserving subdefinitions of class for the objective and subjective aspects. Examples would be Marx and Dahrendorf, who refer to a class in itself and latent interest groups on the objective or nominalist side of the debate, while using the terms class for itself and manifest interest groups on the subjective or realist side.

Another definitional issue is whether **continuous** or **discontinuous class rankings** are most evident. The continuous view is that class or strata should be considered as ranks on a scale; there are positions from high to low, with numerous grades in between. From the continuous view it therefore becomes difficult, or even meaningless, to determine specific class boundaries. The discontinuous view, in contrast, is that there are fewer class divisions, that we can find class divisions with distinct boundaries, and that the divisions between classes are more important than differences within class divisions. Conflict theorists tend to favor the discontinuous and objective views, while functionalists tend to favor the continuous and subjective views (the second leading a few recent functionalists to suggest that the concept of class only weakly applies to the United States; see Nisbet 1959).

We will to some degree take sides in these debates by referring again to what may be considered the most important question in the study of social stratification, *Who gets what, and why?* When attempting to answer this question, we are directed to *objective class divisions* that people may commonly share. Class in a subjective sense (whether people recognize these conditions, interact with others having similar objective interests, and collectively act upon these interests) is important but may or may not exist, depending on conditions that must be explored later.

To identify some of the most important objective factors behind class location, we must consider the *occupational structure*, the *bureaucratic authority structure*, and the *capitalist property structure*. We must understand how people's life chances are affected by these structures, separately and in combination, and, for our present purpose, how people are ranked in each. When we do this, we will also find that the debate over how class should be viewed (continuous versus discontinuous, objective versus subjective) differs to some extent with respect to which of the three structures is seen as shaping class interests. After examining the divisions created by these three structures, we can discuss how these divisions converge on what is commonly referred to as the upper, middle, working, and lower classes in the advanced or postindustrial societies.

**Occupational Structure** By position in the occupational structure we are referring to one's relation to the market, as Weber, in part, referred to economic class. (The other economic class ranking Weber used was similar to Marx's ownership of the means of production.) In other words, within the occupational structure, people are ranked in terms of skill level and tend to receive greater rewards (such as income) with higher skills. (The exact relationship between rewards and skill level will be examined later.) Thus, with the occupational structure we are stressing objective class factors and a continuous ranking. We are not saying that these rankings are determined and rewards given because of the contribution to the needs of society made by a person in his or her occupation, or that status is received primarily because a certain occupation or skill level meets society's needs (the functionalist position). Rather, we are suggesting that rewards are given because the jobs are more or less important to the people (economic or bureaucratic elites) who are more in control of the rewards to be given. This, of course, is the conflict position.

**Bureaucratic Authority Divisions** With bureaucratic organizations we are concerned with organized authority or power structures. As Weber (1947:325) observed, "the imperative coordination of the action of a considerable number of men requires control of a staff of persons"; that is, divisions formed in relation to bureaucratic authority (formalized, legitimated power).

The number of staff and their exact function vary across different organizations, but there are usually top positions such as president, chairman of the board, chief executive officer, and vice president. Below this level we may find many staff positions in charge of more specific functions or departments within the organization, such as assistant secretaries in the federal government or deans within a university. Below these typically many-layered authority positions, and closer to the simple employees at the bottom, we usually find supervisory positions. These include such positions as plant foreman, department chairperson in a university, and employee supervisors in a state agency. Finally, at the very bottom are employees performing various types of labor within the organization—assembling cars, sending bills to customers, watching over welfare recipients and determining eligibility for public assistance, and so on.

**Divisions within the Property Structure** In a Marxian sense it is the property structure that creates a primary division between those who own the major means of production and control both the use of this property and the profits derived from it, and those who fit none of these conditions. In reality, of course, the advance of industrialization under capitalism has created a property structure that is in no way simple.

However, neither was it simple when Marx produced his major works; and, as previously noted (in Chapter 4), many differing levels and descriptions of what he called class can be found in these works. But central to the concept of class for Marx was how people are tied to the productive forces (the means of production) in the society—in other words, the relations of production.

A primary question remains: What is the most useful means of defining property relations or divisions for our present purpose? Following the main idea that class (in this sense) must be defined in the context of people's relation to the means of produc-

tion in a society, Erik O. Wright (see Wright 1997; Wright and Perrone 1977; Wright 1978a) defined *capitalists* as those who own the means of production and employ many others; *managers* as those who work for capitalists and control the labor of others; *workers* as those who simply sell their labor to capitalists; and the *petty bourgeoisie* as those who own their means of production but employ few workers. With this definition Wright was able to show significant income differences between class categories and differing effects of education in obtaining more income (such as managers' receiving a greater return from more education).

### **The Convergence of Occupation, Power, and Property on Class Stratification**

Thus far we have examined divisions or ranks in what many consider three of the most important institutional structures in our society. Not only do these three hierarchical structures help shape the interests of major divisions or classes within the population, for the most part they also provide the setting in which conflicts (sometimes overt, sometimes hidden) over valued rewards take place.

**A Working Definition of Class** It is time to provide the working definition of *class* that will guide the remainder of our examination of class stratification in contemporary societies. One goal of this chapter has been to demonstrate why we must reject any definition of class based on a single dimension of inequality (whether this is occupational status, bureaucratic power, property relations, or anything else). However, in the face of such complexity, how can class be defined in order to capture the many divisions and rankings we have outlined? As noted in beginning this work, we can define a class as a group of people who share common objective interests in the system of social stratification.

A second goal of this chapter has been to specify these important objective interests. We are *not* suggesting that there are three (or more) separate class systems (occupational class, bureaucratic class, and property class systems). Rather, these three structures tend to converge, producing groups or classes that have common interests with respect to all three structures. In contemporary societies, more often than not the *interaction* or *convergence* of all three influences life chances and rewards, or who gets what and why.

In identifying classes in relation to the convergence of the three institutional structures we have thus far examined, we will use the rather standard labels *upper class*, *middle class*, *working class*, and *lower class* (or the poor). In addition, we have inserted between the upper and middle classes a group that will be called the *corporate class*. As is suggested in Table 5-3, members of the upper class tend to have high positions in the occupational structure and bureaucratic authority structure and are primary owners of the means of production. Those in the corporate class are high in both the occupational and bureaucratic authority structures but lack significant ownership of the means of production. Those in the middle class are high- to mid-level in occupation, mid-level in specific bureaucratic structures (when not self-employed professionals), and nonowners. However, while the percent of the American population who are



**TABLE 5-3****THE CONVERGENCE OF OCCUPATIONAL, BUREAUCRATIC, AND PROPERTY DIVISIONS ON CLASS CATEGORIES**

Class categories	Positions in three main types of institutional structures		
	Occupation	Bureaucratic authority	Property relation
Upper class	High	High	Owner
Corporate class	High	High	Nonowner/low
Middle class	High to mid-level	Mid-level	Nonowner/low
Working class	Mid-level to low	Low	Nonowner/low
Lower class	Low	Low	Nonowner

self-employed or are small business owners who hire a few workers (often called the “petty bourgeoisie”) has been declining during the twentieth century in the United States (and other industrial nations), during the 1980s and especially 1990s there has been a slight rise in self-employed people (Wright 1997:114–145). In the 1990s, in fact, 16 percent of the labor force said they had been self-employed sometime in their life. Thus, we must recognize that some in the middle class (and even working class) can own some small means of production (their own tools, shop, etc.), be self-employed, or even hire a few workers and be included among the “petty bourgeoisie.” This is indicated in Table 5-3 to show some among the middle class and even working class could be described as having low amounts of property. Those in the working class are mid-level to low in occupation, low in specific bureaucratic organizations, and usually nonowners. Finally, those in the lower class are low in occupation and bureaucratic authority, and, of course, are nonowners.

The class divisions outlined in Table 5-3 represent something of a synthesis of the three main paradigms of social stratification described in Chapter 4 and the present chapter. Remembering that functional theorists focus on occupational status, power conflict theorists focus on authority divisions, and Marxists or ruling-class theorists focus on property class divisions, it can be seen that all three sets of divisions have been included in Table 5-3. However, two points must be stressed: First, we have rejected the functional view of occupational status ranks in favor of Weber’s view of occupational competition through skill or relation to the marketplace; and second, we have stressed the convergence of the occupational structure, authority structure, and property structure.

This typology of objective class positions is not all-inclusive. There are people or even categories of people that provide problems of placement in the typology. However, it is the function of a typology, as with a theory, to provide some understanding in the face of apparent complexity. The value of understanding class with respect to positions in the three main institutional structures we have examined should be evident in coming chapters. But before turning to these chapters we have one final issue that so far has been avoided. We are now prepared to consider the complex question of class identification, or the subjective dimension of class.

**A Note on Subjective Class Identification** In our discussion of the various views over how class is to be defined, part of the debate centered on the question of continuous versus discontinuous divisions. By defining class in terms of the convergence of three hierarchical structures, we have suggested that classes are divided to some extent with respect to both continuous divisions (occupation and, to some extent, bureaucratic power) and discontinuous divisions (ownership of the major means of production).

However, with respect to another major debate, we have thus far focused on *objective* rather than subjective divisions. The perspective stressed is that clear objective forces determine people's share of valued rewards and life chances, whether or not people always recognize these forces and identify with others having common interests in relation to these forces.

The debate over the extent to which subjective class identification exists, however, is an important question. When the degree of class identification is high in a society, class conflict can be more intense, resulting either in a change with respect to how rewards are distributed or in more force by those on top to maintain the existing distribution of rewards.

Marx, of course, predicted that as capitalism progressed there would be more class conflict as class consciousness also increased. An elementary aspect of class consciousness is simple subjective class identification. We have discussed earlier why many of Marx's predictions about increasing class conflict have failed to materialize. It is time to address the more elementary question of class identification. We will do so by first examining some of the empirical research.

One of the earliest empirical studies of class identification in the United States was conducted by Richard Centers (1949). Previous research (for example, see *Fortune* 1940) had found that when people were asked whether they could be placed in the upper, middle, or lower class, the vast majority (79 percent in the *Fortune* study) said they were middle class. It was interpreted to mean that this is primarily a middle-class nation where class divisions are of little significance (since most people are middle-class).

But when Centers simply added the category of working class in a national study, there was an important change in the responses; 51 percent identified themselves as working class, and 43 percent identified themselves as middle class. Furthermore, about three-fourths of the business, professional, and other people with white-collar occupations responded that they were middle- or upper-class, while four-fifths of the manual laborers responded "working class." Centers's conclusion was that class is a meaningful concept to most people and does correspond to a large degree with objective class divisions (at least with occupational divisions that were stressed by sociologists at the time).

The Centers study has since been challenged as containing some limitations, at least with respect to the conclusions he attempted to draw from his data. For example, Gross (1953) found that when people are given no fixed choices on a questionnaire (such as upper, middle, working, lower class) but are simply asked to name their class position, 39 percent responded that they belong to no class or do not know. Only 31 percent responded "middle class," and 11 percent "working class." (Other responses were 1 percent

upper class, 3 percent lower class, and 15 percent some other class.) When people were asked how many classes there are in the United States, Kahl and Davis (1955) received responses ranging from two classes (10 percent), three classes (42 percent), four classes (20 percent), five or more classes (5 percent), no concept of a class order (12 percent), to explicit statements that class does not exist (6 percent).

Despite these criticisms, it is clear that the concept of class *does* have meaning for most people (Vanneman and Cannon 1987). In the Kahl and Davis study, for example, a total of only 18 percent either denied the existence of classes or did not understand the concept. Given the “classless” ideology of individualism in this country, what is surprising is that only 18 percent failed to provide an opinion of how many classes exist. Furthermore, when sociologists cannot agree among themselves upon the most meaningful number of class categories or the exact class boundaries, it would be unreasonable to expect the general population to do so.

Extensive research has shown recently that the most widely accepted class labels (upper class, middle class, working class, lower class) do show a reasonable correspondence with objective class indicators such as income, education, occupational skill level, and manual versus nonmanual jobs (Hodge and Treiman 1968b; Vanneman and Pampel 1977; Kluegel, Singleton, and Starnes 1977). And Vanneman (1980; Vanneman and Cannon 1987) has found that although people in England were usually assumed to have more class consciousness and class identification than people in the United States, there is virtually no difference in class identification in these two countries among manual and nonmanual workers.

There is one new trend in the research on class identification that is worth mention because it relates to issues in stratification theory and research that will be considered in many places throughout coming chapters. The primary issue relates to how we should consider the place of women in the class system. In the past it was assumed that class placement of women would be determined by the position of their husbands in the occupational, authority, and property structures of the stratification system. With most married women now employed in the labor force, this assumption is no longer unquestioned. Some sociologists argue that the standard of living, income, and property are still distributed through the family unit, and because males continue to have the longest working careers and higher incomes compared with their wives, the class placement of women continues to be determined by the male head of household (Curtis 1986; Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, and Payne 1987). However, there have been a number of new studies on subjects such as social mobility to see if there are differences between the experiences of men and women on these aspects of social stratification.

There is also more recent information on the subject of class identification. Do we find that class identity of women is primarily shaped by the objective class position of their husbands? Or, when they themselves are employed, do we find that women define their class position in terms of their own job, income, and education? Approaching this subject with new data, Davis and Robinson (1988) find that, compared with the 1970s, women in the 1980s increasingly identified their class position with their own occupation and education. And it is interesting that men were doing the same—that is, identifying their own class position with reference to their own occupation, in-

come, and education rather than considering their wives' class position as well. Findings such as these give reason to focus more attention on the possible separate realities of class position for men and women, in addition to the combined realities for the family unit.

The complex nature of hierarchical divisions (rather than a single class structure) in this country produces no clear and unambiguous concept of class for most people. Differences in occupational, bureaucratic, and property positions, as well as income and education level, may all be important dimensions to people, but they do not always correspond (although they are significantly related; see Wright 1997; Wright and Perone 1977; Wright 1978a; Robinson and Kelley 1979; Kalleberg and Griffin 1980). A person may be high with respect to some dimensions and low with respect to others.

Furthermore, while some of these divisions can be viewed as continuous (occupation, income, education, and, to some extent, bureaucratic authority), others are more discontinuous (the property class structure). And *all* of these rankings have been shown to be *separately* related to class identification (Robinson and Kelley 1979). While some people may identify with the middle class because of their position in the occupational structure, others may identify with the middle class (or working class) because of their position in the bureaucratic structure, and so on with all the divisions.

It therefore becomes a complex task for people to choose whether to place themselves in the upper, middle, working, or lower class. But *objective class divisions* are still important in the distribution of valued rewards and life chances among people. As the information we have presented and will present shows, these divisions are important both singly and in combination.

Thus, although the terms *upper class* (and *corporate class*), *middle class*, *working class*, and *lower class* (or the poor) mask important separate divisions and interests between groups in our society *and* do not show a simple or unambiguous relation to subjective class identification, the terms remain useful. These class terms are useful both because they seem to have the most meaning for the most people and because they are to a large degree related to the convergence of divisions in the occupational, bureaucratic, and property structures stressed in this chapter. Our next task, to specify further the value of these class divisions, will be tackled in the next four chapters.

### **A Note on Sociobiology**

As described previously, stratification theorists in this uncritical-conflict category maintain that conflict and inequality (of some kind, to some degree) will always be found in human societies. While most of these theorists suggest only implicitly that conflict and inequality are related to selfish human nature, others are quite clear in their arguments that selfish human nature is behind much of the inequality and aggression found in human societies (see van den Berghe 1974, 1978). To the extent that this is true, we find further support for at least some aspects of this type of stratification theory. Let us examine some of the evidence.

Sociobiology is a new and rather controversial area of study in sociology. Some of the most important works in this area were published by Wilson (1975) and were soon

followed by many critical (see Barash 1977; Lenski 1977; Quadagno 1979; Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984) and supportive publications (see van den Berghe 1977, 1978; Ellis 1977; Bolin and Bolin 1980; Maryanski 1994; Maryanski and Turner 1992; Crippen 1994). The main argument for sociobiology is that by relating our studies of society and human behavior to certain biological tendencies within human beings we can increase our understanding of some aspects of this behavior. The counterargument is that although biology can help us understand the behavior of other animals, human behavior is much more complex and almost completely shaped by learning, culture, the social environment, and other nonbiological factors.

A basic assumption of sociobiology is that what Charles Darwin described as the process of natural selection has resulted in the survival of only those human beings most genetically fit for the environment in which they existed. Those who were best equipped genetically to survive in their environment in turn passed their genes on to the next generation of human beings. The process has continued into the present generation. Most important is that (1) it takes many, many generations for a gene pool to be altered significantly; and (2) because over 99 percent of human existence has been in an environment far different from the one that exists in modern societies, the earliest human environment shaped much of our biologically influenced behavior.

What was it about this early environment that shaped the genetically influenced behavior in people? In contrast to advanced industrial societies, it is argued, basic necessities such as food were seldom secure for early human beings. Competition for the resources that did exist was usually great, and more often than not the competition was from other animals as well (see van den Berghe 1978:30). If this is true—and the description does seem reasonable—over the few million years that human beings were developing in this environment, the most aggressive and selfish people were the ones who survived (van den Berghe 1978:46).

If all this is true, however, how do we explain the frequent altruistic, generous, and cooperative behavior also found among human beings? Sociobiologists add two additional arguments. As for the first, it is pointed out that survival of a gene pool requires altruistic behavior toward kin (Wilson 1975:117; Bolin and Bolin 1980). That is, if a particular set of genes is to survive, there must be protection or even sacrifice for close kin (especially children). Secondly, it is argued that more general cooperation was also required for survival. This cooperative behavior is especially related to hunting: “For early hominids, solitary hunting or even scavenging was not a realistic possibility” (van den Berghe 1978:46). Human beings with a tendency toward this cooperative small-group behavior, sociobiologists conclude, were more likely to survive (Leakey and Lewin 1977:149; Pfeiffer 1977:48).

Sociobiology is a relatively new area of study, and very little of what we can judge to be well-established explanations of human behavior can be found in the literature yet. There is evidence of genetic factors behind *some* cases and *some* types of human behavior, such as extensive violence, alcoholism, and homosexuality. And there is also evidence that many of the biological effects upon human behavior come in the form of emotions located in brain function. Yet, even many who support this area of study admit that some writers have been overly ambitious in trying to set biological founda-

tions for human behavior (see Bolin and Bolin 1980). Clearly, even if there are some biologically based tendencies in human behavior, the wide variety of behavior among human societies tells us that most of what we do is shaped by nonbiological factors. But the preceding description of a biological tendency toward both selfish and altruistic or cooperative behavior does seem reasonable.

What do these selfish and cooperative tendencies in human behavior help us understand about social stratification? Probably not much. It is absurd to think that a set of genes leads us to establish feudal systems or caste systems rather than join the Peace Corps. *But* biologically influenced selfish behavior may lead us to maximizing our rewards under certain conditions. And combined with a tendency toward cooperative behavior, people do tend to share with others, at the same time they are cooperating to exploit others. All of these types of behavior are common in human stratification systems.

Under conditions of scarcity, people tend to become more aggressive. In an earlier chapter we examined archaeological evidence for this type of aggressive behavior during the scarcity that led to early agrarian settlements about 10,000 to 15,000 years ago. Under conditions of adequate resources but no surplus, we found, there was evidence of more cooperative and sharing behavior. And under conditions of surplus goods, people tend to be more selfish, while cooperating with a few to control the surplus. This is precisely the behavior that many sociobiologists predict (see van den Berghe 1974:785).

But this tells us very little of what we need to know about systems of social stratification. It does tell us that we must recognize a selfish tendency among people, and a tendency to cooperate to exploit others under certain conditions. The task for theories of social stratification is to recognize these tendencies and specify how and when this selfish behavior will be maximized or minimized. Perhaps most importantly, stratification theories must specify how the social structure in a particular society determines which interests (attaining ownership of factories, political power, positions in imperatively coordinated associations, or others) are most important.

## **THEORIES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: A CONCLUSION**

In this chapter and the preceding one we examined some of the leading theories of social stratification. We have noted some of the value in functional theories but for the most part found them quite limited. We have noted more value in various conflict theories but again found some weakness. Theories, as Einstein put it, are attempts at simplification. The general task of a theory—any theory—is to evaluate the many factors influencing a phenomenon such as social stratification in order to detect which of the factors or set of factors provides the clearest explanation. It is then the task of social scientists to examine the logic of each theory, balance and weigh the evidence put forth as support for each theory, and make a decision as to which of the competing theories or group of theories is most useful. However, the task is even more complex when we find that some theories answer some questions best while other theories are best in answering other questions.

In the study of social stratification, we mainly want to know who gets what and why. Related to this question are others. How are inequalities maintained? Why are inequalities and the groups that receive the most rewards in the society often quite stable over long periods of time? Why do stratification systems change? Upon balancing and weighing the evidence presented in this chapter, in those that follow, and in our review of history, we have concluded that conflict theories are better able to answer more questions about social stratification.

A main assumption is that *stratification systems are attempts to reduce overt conflict over the distribution of valued goods and services in a society*. Once a system of social stratification is established, the manner in which valued goods and services are distributed requires less conflict and aggression, at least for a time. All of this means, of course, that at the base of social stratification we find individual and, most importantly, group, conflicts. These conflicts may be more hidden at times, the distribution of rewards may be less contested, the power of those at the top less challenged. But this only shows that the stratification system has, for a time at least, succeeded in regulating and controlling the conflicts of interest. As our review of history has shown, however, the conflicts regulated by a system of social stratification are brought to the forefront again and again.

With the various factors helping to shape the nature of stratification systems in mind, we can begin by focusing on stratification systems in advanced industrial societies, especially the United States. We will begin with the structures of social stratification, that is, the class and caste positions and their characteristics, then move to what can be called processes of social stratification, which involve changes and movements in the stratification system.

## SUMMARY

Following the introduction of the three major paradigms of social stratification in the previous chapter, we have examined the modern varieties of functional theory, critical-conflict theory, and uncritical-conflict theory. After a brief review of the history of sociology and views of social stratification in the United States, we considered the functional theories of Davis and Moore and then Talcott Parsons. Because of the importance placed upon the status dimension of social stratification by functional theory, we also examined the nature of occupational status ranking in modern societies and scales to measure occupational status ranks in sociological research. Modern critical-conflict theories of social stratification were introduced by examining some of the problem aspects of Marxian theory. Modern Marxian theories today are primarily divided among those who focus on different problems with the original Marxian theory and how difficulties with the original theory can be corrected. Some of the best modern Marxian theories have combined Marxian insights on economic class divisions with Weber's view of the state and bureaucratic power in capitalist industrial societies. We then examined more recent uncritical conflict theories that can be generally called power conflict theories. Finally, with our discussion of theory completed, we presented a more detailed analysis of the occupational, bureaucratic authority, and property dimensions behind the class divisions in modern industrial societies such as the United States.

**NOTE**

1. It is interesting in this regard to look more closely at studies conducted in the United States and in former communist countries. Yanowitch (1977:105) describes similar occupational prestige studies conducted in Russia, while Parkin (1971) also describes such studies conducted in Poland and Yugoslavia. These studies from communist countries show a consistent difference from those from the United States; working-class or manual labor occupations in communist nations are ranked significantly *higher* than in the United States (higher even than many white-collar or nonmanual occupations).

A conclusion is that a communist ideology that praises the working class, an ideology maintained in part to justify elite dominance, has had an influence on the population's concept of occupational prestige. This conclusion is further supported when we find that occupations in *industries* (such as heavy production) that are given more recognition by the communist elite (by stressing rapid economic development) receive more occupational prestige, even compared with the same occupation in less favored industries (Yanowitch 1977:107).

In addition, the income influence on occupational prestige is shown, because working-class or manual jobs receive more pay than most low-level white-collar or nonmanual jobs in Russia (Yanowitch 1977:30). Furthermore, manual jobs in industrial sectors stressed by the communist elite receive more pay than the same manual jobs in industrial sectors that are not stressed (Yanowitch 1977:32).