Introduction

What post-industrial nation has both one of the highest per capita incomes\(^1\) as well as the highest poverty rate of any industrialized nation?\(^{ii}\) Where can we find the most technologically advanced healthcare system in the world\(^{iii}\) and yet the lowest levels of public health benefits for citizens?\(^{iv}\) What country has a quickly widening gap in wealth between the richest one percent and poorest ninety percent?\(^{v}\) That country wouldn't be China or Japan, France or Germany, not Mexico or Guatemala, not South Africa or Saudi Arabia.\(^{vi}\) While unequal distribution of wealth and resources exist in all of these places, we find that some of the greatest degrees of social stratification exist here in America. Moreover, most Americans realize that there is an enormous divide between the “haves” and the “have nots”.\(^{vii}\) Looking around our country we may see people living in sprawling houses with well-manicured lawns and fancy cars in the driveway.\(^{viii}\) Yet, we may also see people living in dilapidated,\(^{ix}\) substandard housing\(^{x}\) or even living in cars or on the streets.\(^{xi}\) In fact, about one out of every eight Americans is considered to be living below the poverty line.\(^{xii}\)

Stratification

Your textbook defines Social Stratification as “the system in which some people get more or fewer rewards than others.” Inherently systems of stratification (which include slavery, feudalism, the caste system, and the social class system) are unfair and create divisions within a society. The ideal - a true egalitarian system - may exist only in those societies in which the accumulation of wealth is not

Figure 1 - Distribution of Wealth in the US
According to Max Weber, a person’s status, or position within a stratified social system, is determined by their relative power, prestige, and wealth. Power, we will see, is the ability to convince others to do what we want them to do. Powerful people, also known as elites, are successful at controlling the political, economic, social, and cultural institutions of a society. As elites they gain a great deal of prestige, or esteem, from their occupation, rank, political position, or relative importance in the community. Elites may use their positions of power to maintain their high statuses as well as to acquire large amounts of wealth, either in terms of money or property. However, prestige is not synonymous with wealth. There are many positions within a society that are well honored, but make little income or produce little wealth.

Measures of wealth vary based on the type of economic structure of the society. For example, during the feudal mode of production in the middle ages, those with the highest statuses controlled the most land. Land, under this economic system, equated to wealth. The system ranged from kings at the top, who controlled entire countries, down to serfs, who would work the land controlled by knights (See Fig. 2).

During the Industrial Revolution Europe shifted to a new economic system known as the capitalist mode of production. Labor became a commodity in which workers (known as proletarians) sold their labor-power in exchange for money. Yet, wealth was accumulated not by working, but by owning the factories and shops in which people labored. Moreover, competition in the market place created the need to produce more items for less cost and thus lead to technological innovations which
reduced the number of workers needed to do a job. With fewer jobs available, competition between workers kept wages low. Thus, the capitalist owners (also known as bourgeoisie) became the most powerful and prestigious members of the society and accumulated the most wealth from the profit made in selling goods produce by the workers (see Fig. 3).

Social Class in the United States

In the United States, we have a social class system of stratification which may be divided into six basic divisions: the upper class (or capitalists), the upper middle class, the middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the underclass. As noted in Figure 4 the divisions within this system are closely tied to occupations and income. These are known as achieved statutes, or positions obtained during our life course. Consequently, the social class system allows for some degree of mobility between classes. Yet, inheritance and family position (ascribed statuses or those that come from birthright) are important in passing on our social position. Class in America is also interrelated with such factors as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and national origin. In later units we will see that among the underclass in America there is a disproportionately high number of female headed households, children, minorities, and immigrants.

Global Stratification

Today capitalism has grown to become a global phenomenon. The world can be stratified by degrees of industrialization and can be discussed in terms of historic economic and political relations. The same system of stratification in which laborers sell their time and effort to the owners may be applied on a global level, with the rich and powerful nations of the global north acting as the capitalist class, controlling the economies and politics of the “working class” nations of the global south. One theory that we will read about which explains the domination of the most industrialized over the least industrialized countries is Emanuel Wallerstein's World
Systems Theory. We will see how corporations in core nations use the resources of the semi-periphery in order to accumulate profit. We will also find that stratification on a global level is closely related to such factors as population dynamics, health, education, urbanization, and access to technology.
Notes

i https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html#Econ


v mms://realserver.bu.edu:554/w/b/wbur/onpoint/2006/07/op_0725b.wma

vi http://ucatlas.ucsc.edu/


ix http://greensborohousingcoalition.com/?p=40

x http://www.ehponline.org/members/2005/113-5/focus.html

xi http://www.ncdhhs.gov/homeless/homelessfacts.htm

xii http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/08poverty.shtml


xiv http://www.jec.senate.gov/Documents/Reports/08.29.07Poverty.pdf


xvi http://www.heartandsminds.org/articles/childpov.htm


xvii http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF2001/Cuadros/Cuadros.html