

SOCIAL STRUCTURE and MOBILITY

Peter N Stearns, Ph.D.

Impact of Agriculture The rise of agriculture, and even more the advent of more complex societies or civilizations, greatly increased opportunities for social specialization and inequality. The minority of individuals gained disproportionate access to sources of wealth and power: the rise of aristocracies was the most obvious result, but hierarchies of wealthy also emerged among merchants. And at the lower end, in cities and countryside, unskilled, landless groups occupied a bottom social rung.

The Classical Models Each of the classical societies recognized and justified social inequality – that was a common theme – but in quite different ways. Confucian culture offered two basic divisions, between ordinary people and gentlemen: ordinary people owed society deference and productive work, gentlemen owed wise rule, restraint, and attention to the general interest. The Confucian system permitted small amount of mobility, mainly through successful education and a rise into the bureaucratic class; but most people were urged to remain in their social station. India organized inequality into the caste system, in close linkage with Hinduism. Castes defined the kind of work and social relationships that were permitted, including marriage relationships. Caste position was inherited, and lifelong; one could fall beneath the caste for violation of rules, but not rise. However, there was mobility within castes, mainly by wealth; a few brahmans might be quite poor, merchants in the third caste might gain great wealth. Hindu emphasis on reincarnation held the hope of rising into higher spiritual groups in a next life, if caste duties had been faithfully performed during this life. The classical Mediterranean differentiated between aristocrats and commoners, with business groups in between and with the substantial slave population. Some mobility was possible – manumission for some slaves, opportunities for business success to lead into the aristocracy. Here too, however, it was assumed that most people would remain in the group in which they were born, with no wide encouragement to strive for mobility. Philosophers like Aristotle emphasized the importance of slaves and the lower orders to support aristocrats who would have the wisdom and leisure to rule responsibly.

The Impact of the World Religions All three of the great missionary religions emphasized spiritual equality at least for all believers. Buddhists disagreed with Hinduism and the caste system on this point, while continuing to emphasize reincarnation. Islam encouraged common worship (separated by gender) regardless of social class. The new principles raised concerns about slavery. Christianity may have discouraged slavery in Europe, after the fall of Rome, though the institution did not disappear. Islam tried to protect Muslim slaves from mistreatment while encouraging manumission, though tensions with religious principle remained. On the whole, however, the missionary religions did not lead to a massive social reorganization. Only a few small sects, for example in Protestantism, really promoted social equality. Aristocracies continued, as in Christian Europe. Religious concerns about moneymaking might affect the status of merchants – though Islam was a partial exception here in welcoming merchants who observed religious precepts including charity; but merchant activities continued. The rise of more commerce during the postclassical period undoubtedly created mobility opportunities for some rural people, who could find new opportunities in cities; and aristocracies, as in Western Europe, would periodically accept newcomers based on wealth or government position. But there was no wholesale adoption of mobility as a social goal.

The Early Modern Period The expansion of trade and manufacturing, including domestic manufacturing, expanded opportunities for some groups, while also creating a larger property-less class. The ranks of merchants grew. A new upper class emerged on the Americas, formed particularly by landowners of European origin; but no formal, legal aristocracy was established. Domestic manufacturing could disrupt established social boundaries in the countryside. Domestic manufacturing workers were people without much land, but in good times they earned money wages which among other things supported new consumption choices, including more colorful styles of dress. In many regions this was a period of rapid social change and some blurring of traditional markers. Conservatives indeed might complain that it was becoming harder to identify a person's social rank by traditional symbols such as styles of dress. Resistance to social change developed as well. European aristocracies closed ranks to new members during the 18th century, which in the long run helped encourage successful business and professional people to resent the established social order and identify with a new middle class ideal. Colonial officials in Latin America, from Europe, created new separation from the local American-born upper class, again with greater tensions resulting.

The Long 19th Century The big development, centering on the emerging industrial centers, was twofold. In the first place, revolutions or reform movements attacked the idea of an upper class with special legal rights and inherited positions. The legal abolition of aristocracies did not spread uniformly. And aristocrats, even with their position changed, could retain great political and economic power. Indeed a new kind of upper class emerged in places like Japan and Germany, that combined new business moguls with a portion of the old aristocracy. The second development, even more obviously, simply involved the rapid growth of urban social groups – particularly an essentially new working class and a partially new middle class based on novel business and professional opportunities – at the expense of rural groups. Social position increasingly depended on money, rather than land and legal status, with levels of education playing some role as well particularly for professionals like engineers or doctors. Older groups might survive – not only aristocrats, but also peasants and craftsmen – but they would feel increasingly jeopardized; though many artisans sought to take advantage of schooling to improve their social position or that of their children. In this setting, starting in the West, many people began to urge the importance of social mobility. A new middle-class ethic emerged that stressed that with hard work, and possibly education, a family could rise substantially; American culture particularly highlighted this prospect. Reality was harsher: mobility did not come easily for many people, and there was always the chance to drop in status, for example on the heels of one of the frequent business failures in early industrial societies. Many workers did not adopt a mobility ethic, simply trying to maintain their families in the new urban and factory environment. Finally, of course, industrial society did not describe the whole world. The effort to end slavery brought wider social change. But population growth and pressures to lower wages created new social gaps in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Rising levels of immigration reflected the need to seek new locations amid rising economic pressure; but in some instances, it might also reflect a hope that social mobility would be possible in one of the “lands of opportunity” across the water.

Contemporary Patterns Global industrialization set the stage for the most important shifts in social structure, on the whole extending themes that had already emerged in industrial societies. Aristocracy largely disappeared. Some classic aristocracies were unseated by revolution, notably in Russia and China. Commercial and industrial growth created a growing middle class in many parts of the world – by the 21st century, it was estimated that the Indian middle class numbered 80 million people. Communist societies, in their heyday, ultimately tended to replicate a common industrial social structure, after a period of transition. A kind of middle class emerged, embracing managers and bureaucrats, well-educated, mostly identified also by Party membership; some actually attained considerable wealth. In China, Mao Zedong briefly fought this pattern, in the Cultural Revolution that sought to shake up educated elements, sending many to work in the countryside. But the emergence of a communist middle class resumed after this jolting episode, and then the Chinese middle class expanded still further with massive industrial and commercial growth. In many cases, educational attainment began to count for more than sheer wealth or industrial property, highlighting the role of schooling in mobility even more than in the first industrial century. Managers, in multinational corporations, held top power, with ownership distributed among many shareholders. In many cases, particularly by the early 21st century, the same forces that promoted new opportunities in the upper middle class also generated increasing social inequality, in countries as diverse as China and the United States. Everywhere, finally, the size and voice of rural social groups diminished, a major social change in its own right.

Sources

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"On the Formation and Institution of the Caste System-the Aryan Polity." By G. M. Tagore. From *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*. Volume 2 (1863). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3014330>

Suggested Reading:

The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History. By A. Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein (Duke University Press, 2012).

The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility. By Gregory Clark (Princeton University Press, 2015).

Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought. By Louise Marlow (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Discussion

1. How did humans and their ancestors in pre-historical times manage conflict through social hierarchy?
2. How and why did inequalities increase with agriculture?
3. What is the role of religion in defining the caste system? How has the caste system evolved over time?
4. What were the main differences in social hierarchy in ancient China and India?
5. What were the main social effects of the world religions? What were the constraints on change?
6. What role did capitalism play in the development of social structure in America? How did money define one's social role?
7. What role did ethnicity play in the Ottoman Empire's social structure?
8. How has globalization changed social hierarchies? What regions are impacted most?
9. How has race operated in social hierarchies in the contemporary period?
10. Has social mobility increased with industrialization? What are the main regional patterns?
11. Discuss the rise of the middle class in global social history.