HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN 19TH CENTURY

Contents

Chapter 1: Western Europe and The United States: from the late 18th century onward

Overview Social structure in both Western Europe and the United States was deeply affected, from the late 18th century onward, by the twin forces of new political ideas and policies and fairly fairly rapid industrialization and urbanization. Social patterns were, admittedly, not identical. The United States did not have an aristocracy to contend with, but it was strongly marked by slavery and its legacy, plus rapid immigration. As a result race and ethnicity long factored into American social structure, and thinking about social structure, than social class did; social class and class consciousness were much more explicit factors in Europe. The United States also developed an intense belief in the possibility of social mobility, from the early 19th century onward. Americans were far more likely to believe in the ease of social mobility than Europeans were, even though the actual rates, in two industrial societies, were very similar. Western Europe itself exhibited important variety. Most notably, some regions, like France and Western Germany, featured peasant landholding while others, like England, eastern Germany, southern Italy and Spain, highlighted large estates and agricultural laborers. Still, overall trends were widely shared, and on the whole social structures in Western society grew more similar during the 20th century.

Upper classes Europe's landed aristocracy declined gradually but inexorably. The French Revolution effectively ended legal privileges in several areas, though some use of aristocratic titles persisted for several decades. The class lost any particularly distinctive political role. Change was more gradual in Britain and Germany, where large estates continued to pump out agricultural goods and the class continued to use political influence. However, higher taxes on estates reduced aristocratic economic position in Britain in the 20th century; honorific titles persisted, but increasingly rewarded various kinds of achievement, not birth. Defeat in World War II and communist takeover of eastern Germany ended the aristocracy in central Europe. The big news was the rise of a new upper middle class, based on business success in industry, railroads and banking and wielding disproportionate, if informal, political power. Business fortunes in the United States created a number of durable dynasties, particularly in the so-called Gilded Age of the later 19th century. After World War II the upper middle class itself was partially transformed; a new generation of skilled corporate managers, usually highly educated, gained growing importance. New industries, like information technology, catapulted a host of new men into great wealth and political influence. Economic inequality actually increased at the top of the wealth scale, particularly in the United States, but the new upper class was never a closed group.

Rural classes Industrialization and urbanization steadily reduced the numbers and importance of rural groups, often to their considerable dismay. The United States long highlighted the role of landowning farmers, supplemented by agricultural laborers. After the end of slavery in the South, many African Americans continued to struggle as sharecroppers, though there was some independent land ownership. In parts of Western Europe peasant producers held on into the 20th century, though adapting by acquiring at least a primary education and producing more for market sales. In several regions, new peasant cooperatives facilitated peasant market agriculture. However, increasing involvement with market agriculture, growing interest in higher living standards, and acquisition of more expensive farm equipment gradually reduced any distinctively peasant qualities. Everywhere also, though most obviously in the United States, large agricultural businesses, amassing quantities of land and utilizing massive equipment and cheap, often immigrant labor, mounted growing competition with family farms. Rural social classes did retain disproportionate political clout, leading at various points to various kinds of government support and efforts to maintain agricultural prices.

Urban middle classes Western society already had a solid middle class before industrialization, based on merchant activity and the older professions such as law and medicine. During the 19th century this core was altered by the addition of various new kinds of businessmen and professionals (who in contrast to the business group depended on more advanced education). By the later 19th century a growing component of the middle classes was comprised of middle managers in corporate and government bureaucracies; the older middle-class ideal of independent entrepreneurship became increasingly complicated. The 19th-century middle class also developed something of a class ethic, based around ideals of hard work, education, mobility, and family cohesion. This was an ethic lovingly maintained in contrast both to older aristocratic ideals and the interests of the urban working classes, and it would survive into the 20th century.

Urban working classes The most obvious news was sheer growth. From the early 19th century into the 20th, this was the fastest growing social group in the Western world, based on the rise of industry and the extraordinary expansion of cities. The class was fed by in-migration from the countryside and often foreign immigration as well. This latter was particularly true in the United States, but even in Europe immigration from Ireland and southern and eastern Europe played a role in forming the new working class. The bulk of the factory labor force was semi-skilled, relying on skills obtained on the job. However, a highly skilled and even artisanal segment remained, for example in industries like construction that were not fully mechanized. Though guilds were outlawed everywhere in the West, artisans and skilled workers were the first to develop new kinds of trade unions, capitalizing on their skills and organizational traditions. Relationships with the newer working class groups, and the kinds of unions these ultimately developed, were long somewhat complicated, though something of a shared class consciousness did emerge particularly in Europe.

Lower middle classes A small, traditional lower middle class predated industrialization, including literate clerks who, though not paid well, were proud of their distinction from manual laborers, and also the ranks of small shopkeepers. However the size and nature of the lower middle classes changed greatly by the later 19th century with the rise of corporate and government bureaucracies and the establishment of new institutions like department stores dependent on an army of salespeople. Divisions between older and new lower middle class groups were often marked, with shopkeepers harboring special resentments against big business competition that sometimes included new forms of anti-Semitism. The lower middle classes generally maintained pride in their distinction from the working classes. They shared patterns of dress and many mobility ideals with their wealthier middle-class counterparts. Employers also emphasized their distinctiveness, providing superior pension programs for example. Their consumption habits differed from those of the working class as well, and their birth rates and family values overlapped with those of the middle class. Many in the lower middle class, including large numbers of employed women, were subject to considerable emotional manipulation, urged for example to control their responses in order to curry favor with customers.

Later 20th century and beyond Growing prosperity in much of Western society after World War II promoted further social changes, and new welfare programs provided new levels of support for the lower classes, reducing class tensions. Many observers noted increasing convergence between European and American social patterns, though the American welfare network was far less robust than its European counterpart. Working-class class consciousness softened amid a higher standard of living, though (particularly in Europe) a sense of the distinction from the middle classes persisted. The size of the working class stabilized and then fell, thanks above all to growing automation. Many lower-skilled jobs were increasingly taken over by immigrants, on both sides of the Atlantic. Ethnic and racial divisions began to supersede more conventional class divisions. More and more jobs depended on considerable education, and university enrollments soared, feeding into an expanded professional middle class. Older industrial regions were increasingly bypassed in favor of new high-technology corridors, as in the coastal United States or southeastern Britain, creating a new set of tensions including, by the 21st century, new forms of populism.

Study questions

1. What were the key transformations in rural society as the West industrialized?
2. What were some of the major characteristics of the newer middle classes?

3. How did older and newer segments of the working classes interact?
4. What were the main differences and similarities between American and West European social structures in the 19th and 20th centuries?

Further reading

Herrick Chapman and Peter N. Stearns, *European Society in Upheaval* (3rd ed., Macmillan, 1992)

Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1950* (2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2014)

Christof Dejung, David Motadel and Juergen Osterhammel, eds., *The Global Bourgeoisie: the rise of the middle classes in an age of empire* (Princeton University Press, 2019)

Chapter 2: Latin America since 1900

Overview Three features of Latin American social structure over the past two centuries, since the end of the colonial era, are worth special attention. First is the ongoing importance of racial hierarchies, though this varies with the specific region. Groups of European origin continue to predominate in wealth and prestige over mestizos and indigenous groups. In places like Brazil, with an extensive population of African or partly African origin, gradations by skin color are pronounced, more in fact than in the United States though there is less systematic prejudice against the lighter-skinned. Second, and somewhat related, income inequality between the wealthy and the majority of the population has been and remains unusually great, in comparative terms, and persistent over time, again since the colonial period – despite the absence of a formal aristocracy. And third, social structure has reflected the important evolution of the Latin American economy, from emphasis on low-wage agricultural and mineral exports to a much more diversified portfolio, along with extensive urbanization and the growth of urban as well as rural poverty.

Class structure in the 19th century Into the 20th century, Latin American social structure was dominated by the push to expand export production of agricultural and mineral products, backed by governments as well as powerful landlords. Small peasant proprietors were increasingly displaced by larger estates for products such as coffee (in several regions) or wheat (in Argentina). In parts of Central America by 1900, banana production had similar impact. Several regions were also shaped by mining or, again by 1900, oil production. Both mines and plantation agriculture expanded the population dependent on wage labor – and where workers were scarce, as in Argentina and Brazil, European immigrants or in some cases Asian immigrants, some of them on indenture contracts, were brought in as supplements, aimed at keeping wages low. Landowning elites gained great political and well as economic power, joined by a new group of export-oriented merchants in some of the major cities. Middle classes were weak, though they gained some ground by the early 20th century thanks to a growth in public sector employment and the expansion of educational opportunities for a growing minority. In a few cases also, as in Mexico, a noticeable urban working class began to develop, along with some labor unions.

Impact of the Depression Declining export demand hit Latin American economies hard in the 1930s, leading to growing populist political pressure. In many countries, policies shifted to emphasize industrialization, seeking to replace imports from the West with home-grown products. This change prompted considerable growth of urban groups, both middle class and working class. Urban demand also encouraged more commercial agriculture, including (in Mexico) the first stages of the “green revolution”. This however benefited larger landholders, further pressing small-holding peasants. The result was a growing migration of many poorer people into the cities, beginning the creation of the characteristic Latin American urban structure, with vibrant center cities surrounding by massive urban slums on the outskirts (called *favelas* in Brazil) and a correspondingly large informal economy. However, a large factory working class also emerged, forming the largest economic group in many countries by 1960. Many landless peasants now depended heavily on remittances from relatives in the cities (or emigrants to the United States).

More recent developments The complexity and heterogeneity of the Latin American class structure clearly increased from the final decades of the 20th century onward. The further growth of commercial agriculture plus some land reform largely displaced the old landlord class, with many farms now run by middle-class managers. However, rural poverty has remained high. Rural activism Increased, but the

outflow to the cities continued as well. Many rural residents combine cultivation of tiny plots of land with wage labor on commercial farms (plus remittances from family members elsewhere). A distinct and wealthy upper class now combines merchants and exporters with newer industrialists and leading managers in state-run enterprises. Middle classes have grown considerably, with managers and professional personnel, civil servants, and professionals. The ranks of the urban working class, however, have diminished, with significant declines in the manufacturing and mining population thanks to growing automation and foreign competition. Some regions have however benefited from employment opportunities in foreign-owned enterprises producing for export (and often utilizing many female workers). Urban slums and their informal economies remain vitally important, though slower population growth has eased some pressures and a number of successful independent industries have developed as well, creating a more mixed picture. Overall, urban populations continue to gain ground, constituting about 75% of the total by 2000.

Study questions

1. Why, despite considerable social change, has modern Latin America consistently displayed unusual economic inequality?
2. What have been the main challenges to peasant land ownership from the 19th century to the present?
3. What are the principal features of Latin America's urban social structure in the 20th century?

Further reading

Fernando Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (University of California Press, 1979)

Dirk Kruijt, Carlos Sojo, and Rebeca Grynspan, *Informal Citizens: poverty, informality and social exclusion in Latin America* (Rozenberg, 2002)

Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman, "Latin American Class Structures: their composition and change during the Neoliberal era," *Latin American Research Review* 38 (2003)