

SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN 20TH CENTURY

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Chapter 1: Communist Revolutions and Social Structure: Soviet Russia

Overview Communist revolutions in major societies like Russia and China intended to revolutionize social structure, and they had a huge impact. Demolition of older patterns was the most immediate outcome, particularly in doing away with the longstanding upper classes. Correspondingly, massive new opportunities for mobility opened up, enhanced by the rapid expansion of educational systems, particularly in filling the expanding ranks of the Communist Party and government personnel. Treatment of the peasant class, another traditional segment, proved more complicated, though there was major change. Extensive industrialization generated social groupings not entirely dissimilar from those that had developed earlier in the West, as communism yielded some unexpected stratification.

Aristocracy The Russian Revolution immediately abolished the aristocracy, replacing aristocratic titles with the egalitarian term, comrade, and seizing remaining agricultural estates. Many aristocrats were killed, including some engaged in counterrevolutionary activities, and many fled to Western Europe or the United States. A longstanding staple of Russian social structure was removed.

Bases for the new order The professed goal of the communist leadership was a classless society. Economic and political issues during the 1920s complicated plans, as the government had to allow some private enterprise. Differentiations within the peasantry increased, with a minority gaining particular commercial success and sometimes expanding landholding; and a class of small businessmen persisted in the cities. But these were short term features. Overall, thanks to increasing government control of the economy, social structure ceased to depend on differentials in property ownership, and depended instead on differences in prestige (often linked to levels of educational achievement) and political power (often linked to membership in the Communist Party). (The Party had about half a million members in 1924, expanded to several million in the 1930s but was never more than a minority of the population as a whole.) Income was generally a consequence of social position, rather than determining it. All of this was in obvious contrast to the bases of social structure in the West. Officially, the Party claimed that there were only two social classes in the Soviet Union, workers and peasants, and that they were equal, differentiated only by location and specific function. In fact, a more complex structure developed arguably involving four major components: an elite at the top; white collar workers; blue collar workers; and finally peasants and other agricultural workers.

The elite This group, almost entirely composed of Party members including the leadership element, initially reflected a great deal of upward mobility, with many former peasants and workers rising into positions of power. Some mobility opportunities continued throughout the Soviet period: the final communist leader, for example, Mikhail Gorbachev, came from a poor peasant village and rose initially through his performance as a student. The functions of the new elite centered on top government, Party and intellectual activities (the cultural and scientific intelligentsia). Members of the elite received a growing number of privileges, including access to special stores that carried an unusual variety of foods and other consumer items (including imports not available to most citizens) plus access to particularly luxurious summer homes, or dachas. Position depended on function; it was not the result of inheritance. And demotion was always possible, particularly under Stalin. Over time, however, and particularly after Stalin's death in 1953, a certain degree of self-perpetuation described the elite, as children had a better chance to receive and succeed at university education than was true of the population at large.

White collar This category (including some Party members but not confined to this group) included doctors, teachers, engineers as well as the broader run of white collar workers. They were often paid less well than factory workers, but carried higher prestige. Many women participated in the relevant job categories.

Urban blue collar This class, already established before the Revolution, expanded rapidly with industrialization, its ranks swelled by the growth of cities and arrivals from the countryside. (The growth of cities was steady, even during World War II, and by 1989 the overall population was 73% urban – an important shift though below Western levels.) The class had great prestige in the Soviet scheme of things, was glorified in official art and propaganda, and often enjoyed comparatively high wages and benefits. The government for example carefully established vacation resorts for blue collar workers, along the Black Sea and in other desirable sites. At the same time, as was true for working classes in every industrial revolution, factory and mine workers faced intense production pressure and had to adapt to a variety of demanding working conditions.

Peasantry and rural laborers This group, diminishing in numbers though still very large, was at the bottom of the social order (despite some attention from the government). Stalin, aiming at the collectivization of agriculture, took particular aim at the independent peasantry, and millions of recalcitrant peasants were killed. Most remaining peasants lost access to property and simply became part of a rural working class – and agricultural production frequently faltered as a result. Industrialization generally enhanced the rural-urban differential, and Soviet policies simply enhanced the divide.

Trends over time By the 1960s it was becoming clear that the professional and white collar group, like the elite, was increasingly solidifying its position – rather like its counterpart in Western society – and becoming something of a modern middle class. Professionals and factory managers carefully limited their birth rates and devoted great attention to fostering their offspring's success in school with an eye to assuring access to universities. The same phenomenon was noted in other East European communist societies, leading to accusations that the revolution was being betrayed.

Post-communist society The end of communist rule by 1991 most obviously removed Communist Party membership as a vehicle for social power or mobility. At the same time, the transition created new opportunities and, possibly, new clarity for the urban middle classes, now able to enjoy greater access to an array of consumer goods. Many observers in the 1990s noted the characteristics of what they called "New Russians", who seemed to have many of the same aspirations and values as their middle-class counterparts in Western societies (including the continued interest in education). At the same time, however, a new elite group was formed among business oligarchs, closely tied to the government, who managed to acquire ownership of a variety of former state enterprises and real estate holdings, and who frequently rose to great wealth and showy life styles. While no rigid hierarchy developed, social differentiation expanded and was increasingly based on wealth.

Study questions

1. What were the biggest changes in social structure under Communism?
2. What were the main differences between Soviet social structure, as the society industrialized, and its counterpart in the West?
3. Was there a middle class in the Soviet system, and if so what were its principal features?

Further reading

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Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin: origins of the Soviet technical intelligentsia* (Princeton University Press, 1978)

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Chapter 2: Communist Revolutions and Social Structure: China

Overview China's communist takeover dates to 1949, after decades of struggle complicated by the invasion of the Japanese before and during World War II. Implications for social structure were similar to those in the Soviet Union. They were complicated, however, by the twists and turns of industrial policy under Mao Zedong, who initially sought to foster a standard type of industrialization and then turned to an effort to develop a distinctive national variant with an emphasis on small-scale production. This was a failure, at least in the short run, though it exposed more peasants to some manufacturing work; but the result somewhat delayed the more normal rates of urbanization and working-class formation. These developed with extraordinary rapidity, however, from 1978 onward, with the adoption of new policies of industrial promotion. The Mao era was also noteworthy for the "cultural revolution" (1966-76), introduced in part to distract from economic problems: here, Chinese policy aimed at a more thorough eradication of the social and cultural bases of traditional social structure than had ever been attempted in the Soviet Union. Here too, however, patterns changed after 1978, as Chinese economic development began to create an urban middle and upper class rather different from its counterparts under the Soviet Union. Like the Soviet Union, Chinese social structure under communism proved very different from its pre-revolutionary counterpart; however, at the same time, the specifics varied considerably.

Initial moves Communist leadership immediately turned against the remnants of the old landlord-bureaucratic class, eliminating the landlords through land reforms. As in the Soviet Union, collectivization was imposed to prevent the emergence of a new rural propertied class, but the policy severely reduced food production leading to massive rural famine. Members of the Communist Party (drawn disproportionately from the ranks of urban workers) became a new elite, provided with special benefits (including superior housing) and opportunities for training – fairly quickly threatening some reproduction of the old bureaucratic class simply with new membership. The government worked to expand the educational system at all levels, but urban residents had disproportionate access, creating a growing educated middle class. Further development of the urban working class was complicated by state policies requiring permission to leave the countryside. Like his Soviet counterparts, Mao claimed that the revolution had unified the prerevolutionary social classes into one social whole, but this was not the case.

Cultural Revolution This move involved a number of features, but attacks on both the new hierarchy and the older Confucian principles of social structure were central. Many schools and universities were closed, with students sent to the countryside to perform manual labor in social and economic solidarity with rural workers. Bands of youths were authorized to attack older cultural monuments, symbolizing wider rejection of the authority of elders. New attention was paid to peasants, though overall they remained the lowest and poorest social class.

After 1978 New economic and demographic policies not only reversed the cultural revolution, but led to China's extraordinary, decades-long industrial growth (often at 10% annual rates). This had a number of predictable effects on social structure, including the rapid growth of a host of mega-cities, while also significantly modifying, without eliminating, any special communist features. Poverty declined substantially, though this was clearest in the cities and in the coastal regions, leaving some inland villages behind. Communist party membership was still an important social as well as political differential, but economic change created new mobility opportunities partially independently. Rapid expansion of higher education, and interest in higher education, had similar effects, though by the 21st century there was some danger of over-producing university graduates in relation to available jobs. The professional and middle classes expanded, along with a new elite of the very wealthy. By 2019, for example, a middle-income group constituted at least 30% of the overall population, and 71% of Chinese families owned cars – suggesting a familiar kind of middle class based on income and consumer habits. At the same time, however, communist principles prompted recurrent concern about growing inequality, particularly at the upper end of the economic scale. After 2013, under the more severe political regime of Xi Jinping and with some renewed emphasis on the importance of Party membership, anti-corruption programs and other measures were introduced with the professed purpose of bringing the upper business and bureaucratic groups under greater control. A few leading tycoons were actually arrested, leading to interesting questions about the future of the higher end of the Chinese social scale in the future.

Peasants and workers Rapid industrialization steadily increased the size of the working class, and while working conditions were often severe (with little outlet for complaint), pay tended to improve, along with a greater degree of social mobility. A large number of industrial workers were rural migrants, often leaving family members back in the village and often enduring severe housing constraints and marginal legal status in the cities. These same developments steadily reduced the relative size of the rural population, and increased its average age. Many younger peasants, if they did not migrate outright, began to express growing aspirations for greater independence and, often, education – further shattering many traditional features of the peasantry. Changes of this sort arguably added some of the standard social consequences of industrialization to any remaining special features of communist society.

Study questions

1. What were the implications of the cultural revolution for social structure?
2. What was the impact of policy changes from 1978 onward on social structure?
3. Does China's current social structure reflect any significantly distinctive communist features?

Further reading

Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (University Press of America, 2005)

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Chapter 3: India after Independence

Overview The big, distinctive issue in the recent history of India's social structure is obviously the heritage of the caste system. Legally banned since independence in 1947, based on the belief by nationalist leaders that the tradition was incompatible with a modern, democratic state, and subject to a host of remedial measures, the lingering attachment to caste identity has remained a vital feature – often compared to the intractability of racial divisions in places like the United States. Caste has however changed significantly – for example with an interesting increase in the rate of inter-caste marriage. Too much attention to the changes and continuity in caste should not however obscure other features of the social structure. Stratification is profoundly affected by the continued numerical dominance of the rural population – still 65% of the total in 2021, though this is markedly down from the 83% figure of 1950. The expansion of education and its role in providing opportunities for social mobility similarly reflects the rural urban divide, with significant gains falling well short of universal access even at the primary level. Overall, the attacks on the caste system plus changes associated with considerable industrialization provide a distinctive version of the combination of new ideas and new economic forces characteristic of many key societies at some point during the past two centuries.

Dealing with caste: legal and policy changes Article 15 of India's constitution prohibited discrimination based on caste and Article 17 declared the practice of Untouchability illegal. At various points from 1956 onward the government has conducted inquiries into discrimination, setting up a National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to investigate the progress of the "lower" castes. It has provided economic and other incentives for intermarriage among people of different castes and for university admission for the lower castes. Two major castes categories have received primary attention: the Scheduled Castes (sometimes called Dalit) and the Other Backward Class, including castes above the historical Untouchables but presumably suffering economic and educational disadvantages. (It is estimated that about 16% of India's population belongs to the Dalit group, while about 43% are in the Other Backward Class. Another 9% belong to listed Tribes.) These figures are however sometimes disputed, amid assertions that the intermediate and lower groups are not as large as claimed.) This list has been periodically revised, depending on various criteria, with some castes removed from the list because of progress, but others added. A certain number of government posts are reserved for the lower caste categories. In the 1990s for example 27% of all posts in government-owned enterprises and agencies were reserved for the Other Backward Class, along with 22% for the lowest groups. The efforts to undo the effects of caste have commanded considerable attention and resources. Some critics contend, however, that they actually help perpetuate caste identity, because they provide incentives for

demonstrating membership in one of the lower castes (while also potentially creating resentments and assertions of identity in other caste groups). At the same time, leaders in some of the lower groups, particularly the Dalits, have been active in attempting to boost achievement and group esteem. And it is important to note that several of India's top politicians, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have come from levels below the top castes.

Rates of change Caste identities have remained extremely important. This applies obviously to the pride and identity claimed by people of historically higher caste origin, but also to many in the lower group who continue to find caste position natural and who see caste not only as a source of identity but in terms of active mutual assistance. Caste identities and discrimination have even extended to groups of Indians who have emigrated elsewhere; a 2020 case in California thus alleged discrimination against an engineer from a historically lower caste, and issues have also arisen in the United Kingdom. In India itself, change has occurred, but with limitations. Thus despite the reserved posts, people of lower caste origin are overrepresented in the lowest category of government jobs (there are four major categories), but underrepresented in the two top groups. Only 6.1% of all marriages currently involve people from different castes, meaning that for most people caste continues to define boundaries of acceptable social interaction. Violence against people from lower castes remains a problem and according to some indications has increased during the past decade as Hindu Nationalism has gained ground in politics; and convictions for crimes in this category are low. This said, despite the low rates, inter-caste marriages doubled between 1981 and 2005 (almost exclusively in urban India), while the percentage of lowest caste people in the highest paying, most senior jobs in India (public and private sectors combined) increased tenfold, from 1% of all such jobs in 1959 to 10% in 1995. Literacy and health rates for people of lower caste origin have improved steadily, while remaining below overall national averages; the poverty level of these groups dropped from 48% in 1995 to 39% a decade later (compared to the national rates of 35% and 27% respectively). Some authorities now argue that poverty is a much more important variable than caste origin in the actual impact of stratification on Indian life.

Other changes in social stratification: rural As in other societies such as Latin America, India's rural population has been deeply affected, and divided, by changes in the agricultural economy. Large numbers of peasants get by on very small plots of land, while other proprietors have taken fuller advantage of expanding markets for food. India's fabled "green revolution", introducing new methods and crops that have heightened production and reduced food shortages, disproportionately benefited peasants and other owners with more substantial holdings in land, creating new social and regional divisions in the countryside.

Other changes: urban Urban growth obviously expanded the working class, while new educational levels – including very high production of people with doctoral degrees – and white-collar job opportunities greatly enlarged the urban middle class, estimated in 2019 to contain almost 100 million people, or about 5% of the total population (this is up from 30 million and 1% of the total as recently as 1990, a product of rapid recent economic growth). (A substantial segment of the lower end of this class work in service sector jobs, providing customer relations via telephone and computer for insurance companies and other businesses in the United States and Britain, taking advantage of English language capacity.) As in China, the middle class is increasingly defined by consumer life style and income levels, though major acquisitions are far less common and the class as a whole is noticeably smaller than its Chinese counterpart. Economic setbacks from the 2020-21 pandemic may have reduced the size of this class considerably, at least for the time being.

Study questions

1. Why has caste identity remained important in India's social structure?
2. What have been the main changes in the role of caste in India's social structure?
3. What are the characteristics of India's urban middle class?

Further reading

Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: the rise of the lower castes* (C. Hurst, 2003)

Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: changing patterns of stratification in a Tangore village* (University of California Press, 1965)

Dipankar Gupta, *Caste in Question: identity or hierarchy?* (Sage, 2004)

Chapter 4: Sub-Saharan Africa

Overview Social structure in post-colonial Africa (late 1950s to the present) continued to be marked by several legacies from the past: in some areas primarily in the south, a substantial White minority made race a key differentiator in social and economic status, despite political change. In many parts of Africa, shading off from race, patrilineal lineage continued to define many identities. Among several groups particularly in west and central Africa (but also Madagascar), caste systems still prevailed, little changed from before the colonial era. Traditional stratification was bolstered in many cases by the fact that the majority of the population remained rural. However, considerable urbanization increasingly cut into the traditional social structure, with mainly familiar effects including the growing role of both income and differential educational levels in reflecting and promoting social inequality. At the same time, low-wage labor in some cases created some degree of working-class consciousness among some Africans (both rural and urban), here too cutting across older forms of social differentiation.

Change and diversity An obvious challenge in dealing with recent African social history involves regional diversity. The subcontinent as a whole has seen considerable urbanization as well as expansion of literacy, both particularly in recent decades. Overall the urbanization level is now about 44% (up from 35% in 2000), but this ranges from 67-68% in places like South Africa or Botswana, to 52% in Nigeria (the most populous nation), to countries like Rwanda and Niger where urbanization remains below 20%. Literacy rates range similarly: 94% in South Africa, but 37% in the Central African Republic, 62% in Nigeria (64% for the subcontinent as a whole).

Race Legal systems of racial stratification ended with the collapse of the Apartheid system in South Africa in the mid-1990s, preceded by the termination of minority White rule in what is now Zimbabwe. Politically, majority Black rule prevailed. In South Africa Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president, proclaimed a nation defined by a "rainbow coalition" of all the races and ethnic and linguistic groups, and his vision was widely hailed. In fact, however, Whites continued to control many agricultural estates and major businesses, leading to a persistent stratification based on wealth and economic power. This was not however a significant feature of social stratification in other parts of the sub-continent.

Lineage More significant generally was the continuation of affiliations and identities based on extended family relationships, and particularly patrilineal relationships, which also contributed to larger ethnic linkages and tensions within a number of the new African nations. This system of stratification placed a premium on the status and authority of older males, rather than simply income or property levels, and in principle it could cut across rural-urban divides. Urbanization and growing interest in consumerism did place a strain on this older system, with some families pulling away from the obligations (including extensive hospitality) that were customary for extended family relationships.

Caste In many parts of Africa particular ethnic or tribal groups maintained older caste systems, often with little modification and independent of any government support. There are a number of examples, from many different regions. Thus the Amhara people in Ethiopia maintain endogamy and pronounced hierarchy, with different castes assigned to distinct occupations and patterns of social interaction (including marriage); caste identity is fixed through inheritance. The Fula people, a Muslim group widely distributed in parts of West Africa, divide into nobles, then priests, then cattle-owning agriculturalists, then artisans, then groups that were once slave. No intermarriage occurs among the groups. Elsewhere castes similarly still reflect former slave status as well as endogamous occupational groups such as agriculturalists or blacksmiths. In some cases entertainers and story tellers (griots) also form castes. In Madagascar the Merina people maintain castes that reflect former free or slave status, and that ostracize inter-caste marriage.

Upper class In a number of African nations a partially new upper class developed after independence, based on a combination of business success and special ties to the government. The group might include some traditional tribal leaders. It often benefited from the dominance of a particular ethnic group in the

government, as well as links to authoritarian leaders bent on perpetuating their power. Access to government contracts or grants of mineral rights was sometimes involved. Wealthy Africans also often had special ties to global businesses, serving essentially as middlemen to the larger corporations. Many enjoyed fairly elaborate lifestyles: a preference for Mercedes Benz automobiles provided special cachet and also (in Kenya and elsewhere) a somewhat derisive class label, *wa benzi*.

Urban classes Recent assessments of South Africa contend that race has diminished as a stratification factor mainly because a noticeable number of Black South Africans have risen to middle class or lower middle class status based on income and education. (An upper class of top managers and owners represents about 1% of the total.) Middle-class groups – businessmen and professionals – now constitute about 6% of population holding formal jobs, and lower-middle class elements (teachers, clerks and so on) about 29%. 25% belong to a semi-skilled working class, 18% to the unskilled (along with 6% in the category of domestics). This distribution reflects the nation's relatively high urbanization and education rates, so should not be taken as characteristic of the whole region, but it suggests some of the trends that are generally associated with recent patterns in the regional economy. Everywhere, the emergence of an urban middle class is associated with new interests in consumerism and educational opportunity, and an emphasis on the nuclear family.

Rural society and the informal economy Rural populations divide between peasant smallholders and large numbers of estate workers producing export goods like cocoa or vegetable oils, often under miserable conditions. African social structure is also marked by substantial numbers of people operating in an essentially informal economy with often occasional jobs, both in cities and the countryside. Overall, clearly, African society in recent history has been marked by unusual variety, both in conventional social class terms and because of the mixture of stratification systems particularly in the countryside – all complicated by rapid recent social change.

Study questions

1. What social structural systems operate in Africa besides economic class?
2. What is the interaction between race and class in South Africa since Apartheid?
3. What are the bases for the African middle class?

Further reading

Jeremy Seekings, "Social Stratification and Inequality in South Africa at the End of Apartheid," Centre for Social Science Research (Capetown) *Working Paper* #31, 2003.

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