

NORTH AMERICAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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Overview In theory, the American experiment has been a democratic one and class hierarchies were eliminated. In reality, there have been many differences in class and clear hierarchies, which have less to do with position in a church or family alliances and more to do with race, profession, length of time in the U.S., and access to capital.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis culture was not as stratified as other cultures, but it did have clear class distinctions. Based on archeological findings and artwork in petroglyphs, cave paintings and geoglyphes, there were several classes, which included warriors, hunters, and that of shaman and religious leader.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC):

The ruling class was that of the religious leader and the medicine men (shaman class). There were also hunters and those who took care of the crops and the harvest. Women stayed in the camps and did not participate as active medicine men or women, but they were considered to have power due to matrilineage.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD):

Society was organized around matriarchies, which were convenient for lineage and family alliances but they were not used for land ownership since all land was owned communally. The leader of the nation or group was also a religious leader. High status was also accorded warriors and hunters.

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):

In many ways, the Mississippi Culture was similar to that of the Maya and the Aztec. There were kings, princes, and princesses who were part of a royal family. They participated in religious rites and had important roles. However, the role of High Priest was an important one, and it was independent of the royal family. The priests were a very high ranking. In addition, there were individual citizens, warriors, and craftsmen.

Colonial (Early Modern)

English Colonies: Many of the inhabitants of the English colonies came to America to escape religious and political persecution or to pursue economic opportunities. Most would have been considered middle class but there were many who were considered landed gentry, even as there were many who simply wanted to try make their fortune in the New Land.

Religious dissenters: Perhaps the most cohesive group were the religious dissenters. They were middle class and tended to be free thinkers who educated their children at home. They included Puritans, Pilgrims, Quakers, and other independent groups.

Younger sons of the landed gentry with charters from the Crown: Younger sons who would not inherit the land in their families (thanks to entailed estates) often emigrated to America to make their fortune. They were often given charters from the Crown, which was essentially a permit to explore, stake, and claim any land that was not yet claimed by the Crown. This approach was encouraged because it set up a rivalry with the French, who were doing everything they could to win the "land grab."

Indentured servants: Young men and boys from poorer classes did not have the funds to sail to America. So, their families helped them find position as apprentices to a tradesman in America. After a certain number of years of working and being trained in the profession, the contract was satisfied and the individual received his freedom again.

Mercenary soldiers: Prussian soldiers were extremely disciplined and skillful, and they trained the American Continental Army. Motivated by rancor toward England as well as funds from France, the Prussians were considered to be in the military class, and as such, the officers tended to be from nobility.

Slaves: Most slaves were descended from individuals who had been kidnapped and sold from their homes in West Africa. As slaves, and literally the property of another person, they occupied the lowest level of the social hierarchy. They could not own land, vote, have freedom of movement, and were often abused and treated worse than animals.

African freedmen: There were Africans and African Americans who were free, but they were few and far between. There were some freed slaves who came from the Caribbean who were of mixed race.

Dutch Colonies:

Entrepreneurs: The great majority of Dutch colonists were entrepreneurs and businessmen, often setting up financing for commerce and trade. Their centers were along the Hudson River, with large settlements in New Amsterdam, now known as New York. There were also settlements near Albany in Voorheesville and Fort Orange.

Religious dissenters: Protestants who had been persecuted in France and in England often moved to the Holland. When they had the opportunity to move to America and set up colonies and potentially thrive, they happily did so. They were largely middle class and agrarian.

Spanish Colonies:

Peninsulares: The Peninsulares were those from the Iberian Peninsula and they were at the top of the social hierarchy. They occupied positions of responsibility and trust for the Spanish crown.

Criollos: Criollos were considered "White" because they were descended from Peninsulares. They occupied, with the Peninsulares, the highest rungs of the social order.

Mestizos: Criollos who had children with the indigenous peoples were called "mestizos" and they soon became the most populous social class in the Spanish-controlled part of North America.

Indios: Unfortunately, the indigenous peoples had virtually no rights and were barred from owning land. They lived in tremendous poverty and misery.

French Colonies:

Catholics and priests: The Catholic clergy occupied positions of authority in the French colonies.

French governmental officials and appointees: The representatives of the French monarchy occupied the highest levels of society and were able to make administrative and judicial decisions that affected the lives of all who lived in the French adjudicated areas.

Indians / mixed race: The Indians and mixed-race peoples were consigned to the destiny of all conquered peoples, which is to say that they had almost no status at all in the colonies.

Fur traders and explorers: They were important to the French monarchy and were often well-funded because their ability to explore and claim land for the French crown was vital to the health of the colonies.

Nineteenth Century

Aristocrats: In theory, America was founded to correct the ills of monarchies and aristocracies. In reality, the wealthy planters, bankers, businessmen, and industrialists were America's aristocracy and they dominated both commerce and the governance.

Whites of Northern European Descent: People of European descent occupied the highest class. Within the whites, the social differentiation usually had to do with wealth. Women did not have the right to vote, and they had limited self-determination and financial authority.

African-American: There was no question that African Americans were relegated to the class and were essentially disenfranchised for most of the 19th century, even after slavery was abolished. To open up opportunities and to combat racism and disenfranchisement, African American leaders established businesses, churches, and universities.

Creole: The descendants from the original French settlers who lived in the French-settled territories were in the upper classes. They lived in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and the Mississippi Valley.

Indians: Indians were attacked, persecuted, targeted for extermination, feared and forcibly removed to unwanted territories. They occupied a pariah class.

Immigrants: Southern European immigrants settled in New York and along the East Coast. They were subjected to a great deal of prejudice, as were the Irish, principally because they were Catholic and they often arrived in an impoverished financial state.

Central and Eastern Europeans: The immigrants who came from Central and Eastern Europe were usually either Jewish or they were farmers seeking refuge from the endless wars. The farmers settled in the Great Plains where they established wheat farms and ranches. They became important entrepreneurs and industrialists with the advent of the railroads.

Chinese (labor force for railroad construction): Workers from China came voluntarily or were kidnapped to work in the construction of the railroads in the western states. They were treated quite badly, often because of the vast cultural differences between a European-based culture, as well as challenging language differences. They occupied a level of society that was, at least at first, very low. Later, Chinese became successful entrepreneurs and educators.

Women: During the nineteenth century, women were nominally revered and placed on pedestals as mothers and symbols of virtue. However, they had very little political or economic self-determination.

Twentieth Century

Robber Baron: Often monopolists, the robber barons manipulated the laws and the banking structures to acquire controlling interests in major industries and in natural resources. They later often donated money to philanthropic causes.

Professional class: Occupying a high rung in society, the college-educated professionals (doctors, lawyers, educators, accountants) often owned businesses as well. They were considered aspirational with an ability to move up in social scale.

Middle class: For many years, the middle class was the most upwardly mobile class, and it was possible to achieve that standing by means of education, thrift (savings and investment), and entrepreneurship.

Factory worker / union: The working classes gained a boost with the formation of unions, and the protections afforded the union workers. They were able to have better health, work shorter hours, and have better wages. Toward the end of the century, the unions were under attack for corruption and for

contributing to costs that made the end products unable to successfully compete in the world marketplace.

Entrepreneurs: Successful entrepreneurs are able to catapult themselves into the highest rungs of society, particularly when their business acumen is coupled with technological breakthroughs such as the telephone, television, computer, airplanes, automobiles, etc.

Women: Women's standing in society dramatically changed in the 20th century as rights and privileges that were accorded men such as the right to vote, work outside the home, own property, and more, were installed.

Civil Rights Movement: African Americans, who had lost the right to vote, were re-enfranchised in 1964. Since that time, great improvements have been made, but still there are problems and racism exists in American society.

Poor / underclass: Despite the successes of people who have achieved the American Dream, and the possibility of upward mobility, poverty still exists in America. Persistent pockets of poverty exist in rural America, in mountainous coal-mining Appalachia, in old industrial centers (Detroit), in locations isolated from commerce and industry. There are also the poor in urban areas who are homeless or almost homeless, living a precarious existence in the shadows of society in homeless shelters, abandoned buildings, low-cost motels. Many of the poor are unwed mothers, their children, drug addicts, and formerly incarcerated males. Others are the working poor, who find they cannot subsist on the scanty hours and minimum wage of restaurants, etc.

Discussion/Questions

1. Religious leaders were an important part of North American civilizations, and they often occupied the top rungs of society. Please reflect on the beliefs held by the early civilizations and explain why the religious leaders might be accorded such a high rung in society.
2. The groups who emigrated to North America came from different backgrounds and they had different goals and purposes for coming. Many came to find their fortunes, while others sought to escape persecutions. Others were kidnapped and forced into slavery. Select four or five groups and discuss the degree of opportunity that coming to North America might have offered them.
3. In the nineteenth century, expansion of the American frontier, the push toward the Pacific, and also the development of technology contributed to opportunities for upward social mobility. Describe the groups that might have benefited most from technology and westward expansion. Identify the groups and classes that might lose standing during that time and explain why.
4. In the twentieth-century, social mobility became more fluid with the advent of unions, the Civil Rights movement, the GI Bill and subsidized college educations, and the availability of entrepreneurial capital and investment. Describe the groups that had the most dramatic positive change in the 20th century.

Readings

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