

[See this page in the course material.](#)

Learning Outcomes

- Differentiate between social stratification systems

Systems of Stratification

Sociologists distinguish between two systems of stratification. **Closed systems** accommodate little change in social position and are typically based on ascribed status or some trait from birth. They do not allow people to shift levels and do not permit social relationships between levels. **Open systems**, which are based on achievement, allow movement and interaction between layers and classes. These different systems reflect, emphasize, and foster certain cultural values and shape individual beliefs. Some stratification systems include slavery, caste systems, feudal/estate systems, and class systems.

Slavery

In examining social stratification, we can begin by looking at slavery in the U.S., which was based on race and resulted in a social stratification system—people were not enslaved because of crimes they committed, debts they owed, or lost wars. **Chattel slavery** occurs when one person owns another as property. Slaves were taken from West Africa beginning in the 17th century and brought to U.S. colonies, mostly to work as laborers in the growing agricultural economy. The system was maintained by birth, so children born to slaves were automatically slaves and considered property—or “chattel”—of the slaveowner.

While the slave trade was discontinued in 1808, slavery was not abolished until the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865 (the same year the Civil War ended), and vestiges of slavery persisted through the Reconstruction era and beyond^[1]. The racial stratification of Americans continued through Jim Crow segregation laws, which faded in the 1950s and 1960s as the Civil Rights Movement emerged, and through the convict lease system, which was also gradually phased out in the 20th century. The South African apartheid system is another example of social stratification based on race, or skin color. Apartheid officially began in 1948, and gave the minority white population political and cultural power, while oppressing Blacks, “Coloured” (i.e., people of mixed race), Indian, and Asian peoples. It did not end until 1994. Both of these systems used race to justify closed systems of stratification.

The global watchdog group Anti-Slavery International recognizes other forms of slavery: human trafficking (in which people are moved away from their communities and forced to work against their will), child domestic work and child labor, and certain forms of servile marriage, in which women are effectively property, or chattel slaves (Anti-Slavery International 2012).

Another type of slavery is **debt bondage**, or bonded labor, in which the poor pledge themselves as servants in exchange for the cost of basic necessities like transportation, room, and board. In this scenario, people are paid less than they are charged for room and board. When travel is required, they can arrive in debt for their travel expenses and be unable to work their way free, since their wages do not allow them to ever get ahead.

Further REsearch

People often think that the United States is immune to the atrocity of human trafficking. [Learn more about trafficking in the United States.](#)

Learn more [information about ongoing practices of slavery in the modern world.](#)

The Estate System

The ninth century gave rise to feudal societies. These societies contained a strict hierarchical system of power based around land ownership and protection. The nobility, known as lords, placed vassals in charge of pieces of land called fiefdoms. In return for the resources that the land provided and a guaranteed place to live, vassals promised to fight for their lords. Feudalism was a closed system where land ownership was inherited. The peasants who worked the land served lords for generations and generations as the estate system hierarchy was automatically reproduced at birth.

Like slavery in the U.S., a person's birth determined his or her social standing. In the estate system, this meant a person could be born a peasant, a commoner, or with access to more property and opportunity, such as a member of the clergy or nobility might have. The justification for this rigid hierarchy was often based on certain religious beliefs, especially that of "divine right," or the idea that some men rule by God's will. Ultimately, the social and economic system of feudalism failed and was replaced by capitalism and the technological advances of the industrial era.

The Caste System



Figure 1. India used to have a rigid caste system. The people in the lowest caste suffered from extreme poverty and were shunned by society. Some aspects of India's defunct caste system remain socially relevant. In this photo, an Indian woman of a specific Hindu caste works in construction, and she demolishes and builds houses. (Photo courtesy of Elessar/flickr)

Caste systems are closed stratification systems in which people can do little or nothing to change their social standing. A **caste system** is one in which people are born into their social standing category, or "caste," and will remain in it their whole lives. People are assigned occupations regardless of their talents, interests, or potential. There are virtually no opportunities to improve a person's social position.

In the Hindu caste tradition, people were expected to work in the occupation of their caste and to enter into marriage according to their caste. **Endogamy** refers to the practice of marrying

within one's own caste category. Accepting this social standing was considered a moral duty. Cultural values reinforced the system. Caste systems promote beliefs in fate, destiny, and the will of a higher power, rather than promoting individual freedom as a value. A person who lived in a caste society was socialized to accept his or her social standing.

Although the caste system in India has been officially dismantled, its residual presence in Indian society is deeply embedded. In rural areas, aspects of the tradition are more likely to remain, while urban centers show less evidence of this past. In India's larger cities, people now have more opportunities to choose their own career paths and marriage partners. With India's emergence as an economic power, corporations have introduced merit-based hiring and employment standards to the nation.

Watch It

Finish watching the selected clip from this video to learn more about types of stratification systems.



[Video Link](#)

Try It

What factor makes class systems open?

☐ People are encouraged to socialize within their class.

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

What factor makes caste systems closed?

☐ Most have been outlawed.

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Slavery in the pre-Civil War U.S. South most closely resembled _____.

☐ debt bondage

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

In a U.S. town, a mining company owns all the stores and most of the houses. It sells goods to the workers at inflated prices, offers house rentals for twice what a mortgage would be, and makes sure to always pay the workers less than needed to cover food and rent. Once the workers are in debt, they have no choice but to continue working for the company, since their skills will not transfer to a new position. This situation most closely resembles _____.

☐ child slavery

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

The Class System

A **class system** is an open system based on both social factors and individual achievement. Individuals within a class system are free to gain a different level of education or employment from that of their parents, and can socialize with and marry members of other classes. The class system has fluid boundaries—think of “rags to riches” stories, or stories of wealthy and powerful people being brought low through criminal conviction for crimes such as fraud, insider trading, murder, or extortion.

Class is determined by **wealth** and **income** and is considered an achieved status, or one which is earned. Wealth refers to the total value of money and assets such as property and stocks, whereas income refers to the money a person earns from work and/or investments. A person can have a lot of wealth but little income (i.e., someone with a trust fund or inheritance), and conversely, someone can have a large income but very little wealth (i.e., someone who spends as much as they make, but does not purchase property or invest).

Max Weber identified the following three components in class systems of stratification: class, status, and power (1922). Class, as stated above, includes wealth and income. Status is the prestige or honor accorded to one’s position and/or to one’s name. Power is the ability to exert one’s will over others. One can examine President Donald Trump as an individual who has reached some of the highest levels of class, status, and power. The President of the United States (POTUS) is often described as the most powerful politician in the world, and one of the main duties of POTUS is to oversee the U.S. armed forces, which itself entails an extraordinary amount of power.

Weber's views on class differed with those held by Marx, who viewed society as composed of the two classes of bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (workers). Weber thought economic position was important, but also emphasized status and power as important components for understanding the class system. An Olympic Gold Medalist for example, might enjoy a high status, and may also increase her income and wealth through endorsements with big brands like Nike or Adidas, but this does not necessarily make them *powerful*.

Another sociological perspective distinguishes the classes, in part, according to the relative power and control they have over their own lives. In this view, the upper classes not only have power and control over their own lives but their social status also gives them power and control over the lives of others. Consider the 1% and the disproportionate political power that billionaires hold in making decisions that affect other peoples' lives.

The Weberian framework is particularly helpful in examining the interconnectedness of class, status, and power, and how these components influence class stratification. Consider decisions regarding health care. Most middle class jobs include health and dental insurance, which allow individuals and families to have a greater degree of control over health-related decisions. In contrast, the working class and the working poor have less control over their work or health care decisions, and often struggle to acquire and maintain access to health insurance. The lowest classes are made up of people in society who have the least amount of control over their lives.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is an ideal system based on the belief that social stratification is the result of personal effort—or demonstrated merit—that determines social standing. High levels of effort will lead to a high socio-economic position, and vice versa. The concept of meritocracy is an ideal—because a society has never existed where social rank was based purely on merit. Because of the complex structure of societies, processes like socialization, and the realities of economic systems, social standing is influenced by multiple factors—not merit alone. Inheritance and pressure to conform to norms, for instance, disrupt the notion of a pure meritocracy. While an entirely untroubled meritocracy has never existed, sociologists see traces of meritocracy throughout modern societies when they study the role of academic and job performance rating, as well as the systems used for evaluating and rewarding achievement in these areas.

Try It

Based on meritocracy, a physician's assistant would

☐ most likely marry a professional at the same level.

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Watch It

One good way to examine stratification in the United States is to break down the population in quintiles, or five groups each representing 20% of the population. This CrashCourse video explains general information related to each quintile, then examines ways that class, status, and power all play into stratification in the U.S.



[Video Link](#)

Think It Over

- In what ways does the class system support the myth of a pure meritocracy? Who is

helped and who is hurt by this ideology?

- Using your sociological imagination, consider how a history of colonialism and/or imperialism and/or slavery residually affects a country's system of stratification. Please consider the United States and at least one other country.

glossary

caste system: a system in which people are born into a social standing that they will retain their entire lives
chattel slavery: a form of slavery in which one person owns another ("chattel" means "property")
class: a group that shares a common social status based on factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation
class system: social standing based on social factors and individual accomplishments
debt bondage: the act of people pledging themselves as servants in exchange for money for passage, and are subsequently paid too little to regain their freedom
endogamy: refers to the practice of marrying within one's own caste category
income: the money a person earns from work or from dividend-paying investments
meritocracy: an ideal system in which demonstrated personal effort and ability—or merit—determines social standing
wealth: the value of money and assets a person has, perhaps due to inheritance

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1. Congress abolishes the African slave trade. History.com.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/congress-abolishes-the-african-slave-trade> _

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