6.S: Social Stratification (Summary)

Summary

1. Almost all societies are stratified according to wealth, power, prestige, and other resources the societies value. Societies are often categorized into systems of stratification according to the degrees of inequality and vertical social mobility that characterize them.

2. Systems of stratification include slave societies, caste societies, and class societies, with class societies the most open in terms of vertical social mobility. Classless societies exist in theory, according to Karl Marx and other thinkers, but have never been achieved in reality. Certain social democracies in Western Europe have succeeded in limiting their degree of inequality while preserving political freedom.

3. The two major explanations of stratification are the functionalist and conflict views. Functionalist theory says that stratification is necessary and inevitable because of the need to induce people with the needed knowledge and skills to decide to pursue the careers that are most important to society. Conflict theory says stratification exists because of discrimination against, and blocked opportunities for, the have-nots of society. A set of ideological beliefs supports the existence and perpetuation of systems of stratification and domination. In the United States, these beliefs include the ideas surrounding the American Dream ethos that even poor people can succeed by working hard and pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.

4. Social class in the United States is usually measured in terms of socioeconomic status, but some conflict theory scholars prefer measures more related to Marx’s concept of the ownership of the means of production. Many typologies of the American class structure exist, but four commonly delineated classes include the upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class or the poor. Within the upper class and middle classes are subclasses distinguished by their incomes and lifestyles.

5. Many studies examine the degree of vertical social mobility in the United States. Some vertical mobility does exist, but overall it’s fairly small. Your family’s socioeconomic status (SES) greatly affects your own chances for success in life; people on the bottom of society usually can move up only a little bit, if at all.

6. The United States has the highest degree of economic inequality in the industrial world, and its degree of inequality has increased in the last two decades. Although our poverty rate declined in the late 1990s, it was as
high as in the middle 1960s, before the war on poverty began reducing the poverty rate.

7. Poverty rates are strongly related to factors such as race and ethnicity, age, and gender. Although most poor people are white, people of color have higher poverty rates than whites. About 40% of all poor people are children under the age of 18. Single-parent households headed by women have especially high poverty rates.

8. In explaining poverty, observers attribute it either to personal deficiencies of the poor themselves or instead to structural problems in American society such as racial discrimination and rundown schools that block the ability and opportunity of the poor to improve their lot. Poverty has dire effects for the poor in many areas of life, including illness and health care, schooling, and housing.

9. The nations of the world differ dramatically in wealth and other resources, with the poorest nations in Africa and parts of Asia. Modernization theory explains global stratification in terms of deficient cultures of the poorest nations, while dependency theory explains it in terms of colonization and exploitation by the richest nations in Western Europe and North America. The residents of the poorest nations live in miserable conditions and are at much greater risk than those of the richest nations for deadly diseases and other major problems.

Using Sociology

It is Thanksgiving dinner, and your family and other relatives are gathered around a very large table. Having taken a few sociology courses, you subscribe to the structural explanation for poverty presented in this chapter. One of your cousins asks if you have any career plans after college, and you reply that you’re thinking of becoming a community activist in your home state to help the poor deal with the many problems they have. Your cousin is surprised to hear this and says that poor people are just lazy and don’t like to work. A silence sets over the table, and everyone is staring at you, wondering what you will say in response to your cousin. What do you say?