

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Social Inequality and Differentiation

Unit M1: Ethnicity and Stratification

Introduction

As we have seen in relation to various sociological perspectives on stratification, an understanding of the concept involves something more than simply ranking people in society in a "neutral" way (that is, simply noting that social differences exist). In this respect, it involves the acknowledgement of two main ideas:

Firstly, any **system of social stratification** involves differences in both,

- a. **Material qualities** (wealth, income and the like) and
- b. **Non-material qualities** (power, status and so forth)

Secondly, stratification involves something **more** than a simple **reflection** of social differences.

We need, therefore, to understand how social inequalities themselves contribute to the **unequal distribution** of **material** and **non-material rewards** in any stratified society. In effect, we need to understand how **social stratification** not only **reflects** the institutionalisation of social differences but also **contributes** to their creation.

The main point to note here is that when we classify something we assign the behaviour that is so classified a set of social characteristics, since it would be a fairly pointless exercise if this did not happen (if we have no need to classify social phenomena then we do not attempt to classify them).

We then use our classification system to **institutionalise** the social characteristics we've identified. In this way, we classify things on the basis of their "differences" and use this to justify our classification system.

This rather convoluted point will be important when we consider stratification systems based around the identification of ethnic differences.

Ethnicity and Social Stratification

In relation to our understanding of **social stratification** based on or around the concept of **ethnicity**, there are two main areas that we need to discuss:

Firstly, those forms where **biological characteristics** (such as skin colour) are a determining characteristic of an individual's position in a stratification system.

In such societies, both **racism** and **racialism** are practised **legally** (that is, it is considered normal for a society as a whole to discriminate against particular ethnic groups).

Secondly, those forms where **ethnic background** is used to discriminate against individuals or groups, such that biological characteristics are used to deny people equality of status, income, opportunity and the like.

In such societies, both **racism** and **racialism** may be practised, but not "legally" (that is, laws may exist that explicitly make discriminatory behaviour a criminal offence). In such societies, while there may be no legally racist barriers to social advancement / mobility, racist ideas nevertheless contribute to the congregation of various ethnic groups in the lowest positions in the stratification system.

Institutionalised Racialism

We can begin this analysis by looking briefly at the first of the categories noted above, mainly because societies that have practised institutionalised racialism tend to be easier to describe and evaluate.

Historically, several societies have existed where social stratification has, to a greater or lesser extent, been based upon racism and the institutionalisation of racialism. We can note the following examples:

1. **Slave** societies / systems such as the **American Southern States** during the 18th and 19th centuries.
2. Societies in which ethnic discrimination was officially sanctioned by government. An example here might be the treatment of **Jews** in **Germany** during the 1930s - 1940s. Jews were stigmatised (for example, forced to wear yellow triangle patches on their clothes to identify them as Jews), had their land and property confiscated by the government, were barred by law from working in most occupations and, worst of all, were systematically exterminated in concentration camps - estimates of the number of Jews who were murdered in such camps varies from between 4 and 8 million...
3. Societies that practice ethnic group distinction and discrimination, such as **South Africa** between 1945 and 1994. The particular policy in this society was one of "separate development" (no mixing of the "races"), whereby each person in society was classified "racially" into one of three groups - White, Black and Coloured. Separate development, in South Africa meant, in effect, extreme forms of discrimination against "non-whites".
4. In addition to the above, various societies have practised piecemeal forms of institutionalised racism and racialism. For example:

The English when they colonised India in the 18th / 19th centuries.
Jews in Palestine in the latter half of the 20th century.
Countries such as Germany and France in the (very low) status they afford to "guest workers" (Turks, Moroccans and the like).

While we need to be aware of these types of social stratification, a more-theoretically complex task is to look at the second of the categories noted above.

Disproportionate Representation...

In the first category, stratification based squarely on ethnic grounds is clear, institutionalised and built into the political / legal structure of society through a variety of discriminatory measures. In the second category we have a more complicated situation in which ethnic groups find themselves disproportionately represented at the bottom of the stratification system not because they are legally discriminated against but because of a complex interplay of factors involving:

Class, Status, Racism (the ideology of) **Power** and so forth.

In the following section, therefore, we can explore the relationship between **ethnicity** and **social stratification** in terms of "**class based**" and "**status based**" theoretical perspectives.

A. Class Based Theories of Ethnic Group Inequalities.

Marxist perspectives are most closely associated with the analysis of **class-based forms** of **ethnic stratification**. We can, therefore, begin by noting a few comments in terms of the Marxist view of the relationship between the concepts of "class" and "race", before discussing a couple of Marxist models of ethnic stratification.

Generally, Marxists have encountered several theoretical problems when looking at the relationship between ethnicity and stratification, for the following reasons:

In a stratified society, people are encouraged (through their experience in the world) to both look for and, in some circumstances create, status differences, since differences in status can be used as a social resource (it can "buy" income differences, etc). In this type of society, any difference (biological or cultural) between individuals / social groups can be potentially exploited to create status differences.

In this respect, what matters theoretically is not so much who exploits these differences or who is exploited by them (although, in real terms, of course, these are highly significant questions that can have a multitude of consequences for various people); rather, the question is why do some differences appear relatively easy to exploit, while others are not.

Firstly,, an important factor here seems to be the **visibility** of differences between social groups. For example, it appears relatively easy to discriminate against people on the basis of biological sex, skin colour, age, disability and so forth, given that these things tend to be highly visible characteristics.

However, "**visibility**" itself **cannot** be the defining factor here (although it is clearly **important**), since there are **other**, highly visible, characteristics that could potentially be exploited on the basis of their visibility but which are rarely, if ever, successfully exploited; for example, differences in hair colour, height, weight and so forth. Besides visibility we might add the ease with which a **dominant status group** can **distance** itself from a **subordinate status group**:

Men can distance themselves from women,
Whites from non-whites
Young from old,
Able-bodied from disabled...

"**Social distancing**" (the ability to describe how "we" are different to "them" - and, by extension, the way "we" are superior (and deserving of better treatment) to "them") is an important element in the process of **status discrimination**. In addition, the ability to distance one social group from another (however arbitrary the distinction being used) requires the ability to rationalise the basis of the distinction. In effect, it is not enough simply to show that you are different, you have to be able to justify (however unfounded the justification) the difference. Thus,

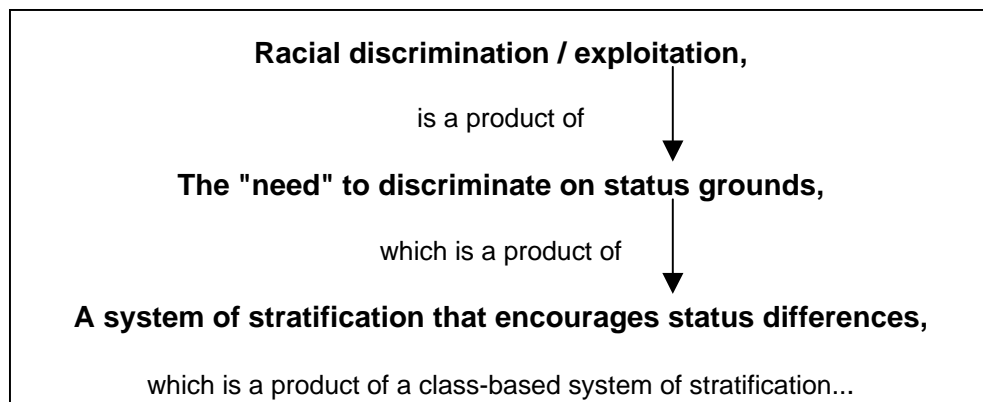
Men are different to women biologically (and by extension emotionally).
Whites are different to non-whites culturally (and by extension intellectually).
The young are different to the old chronologically (and by extension physically).
The able bodied are different to the disabled physically (and by extension mentally).

In this respect, the ability to **exploit** a difference involves a **combination** of many different social factors:

- a. Levels of power possessed by each group.
- b. Existing status levels in society
- c. The ability to create and key-into ideological stereotypes, myths, traditions etc.

In the above respect, the **theoretical problem** for Marxists is not the fact that people are discriminated against (since it is clearly easy to show this empirically). Rather, the problem is that the categories created in any society as the basis of discriminatory practices are more-or-less "arbitrary" (in the sense that I've outlined above - if someone is looking to discriminate then almost any biological / social difference will do).

Thus, in terms of "race" or "ethnicity", Marxists tend to argue that the significant factor in racial discrimination / stratification is **not** "race" or ethnicity (defined in cultural terms), but rather the **economic, political and ideological organisation of society** that **allows** (and **encourages**) certain **dominant groups** to **discriminate** against other groups. Thus,



In this respect, the theoretical problem for Marxists has tended to be that of how to acknowledge the **fact** that **racial discrimination is degrading** (both for the victimisers and the victims), while arguing that "**racial**" discrimination is a **product of class-based systems of social stratification**.

In this respect, ethnicity is only a sociological issue for Marxists in terms of the way it can be related to what **Stuart Hall** ("Culture, Media and Language", 1980) has called a set of,

"Economic, political and ideological practices".

In this sense, "race" is a socially-created label that is used to **describe, categorise and stereotype a mythical group** - one defined by supposedly genetic "racial characteristics" (although there is a tendency amongst **modern racists** to rationalise their discrimination on "**cultural**" rather than purely **biological** grounds). Thus, rather than attempt to focus their analysis upon the kinds of stereotypical, ideologically-produced, categories created by dominant social groups who are seeking to extend their social status only by creating an artificial grouping of lower social status, Marxists tend to focus on the various ways social / biological differences (culture, sex, skin colour, age and the like) are **exploited** by the relatively powerful to oppress the relatively powerless.

The **crucial variable** here, therefore, is **power**, and in class stratified societies power is related to an individual's position in relation to ownership / non-ownership of the means of production. Given this fact, it is hardly surprising that Marxists should attempt to understand the nature of ethnic-group discrimination and stratification in terms of the way in which ethnic groups are economically and ideologically exploited in class-based systems of stratification.

If we accept this argument - that Marxists tend to look at the way in which any kind of human difference (real or imagined) can be exploited by those who possess significant levels of economic and political power - it follows that, for Marxists, **class** is seen as a "**primary**" (that is, most significant) **form of stratification** in modern societies, while stratification in terms of concepts such as **ethnicity, gender and age** are considered as a "**secondary**" (that is, dependent) form of stratification.

To **summarise** this basic Marxist position, we can say that such sociologists focus their attention upon class-based forms of explanation because:

1. "Social class" is an objective category defined in terms of an individual's relationship to the means of economic production in society. The relationship confers power upon individuals, social groups and whole classes.
2. Categories such as "gender", "race / ethnicity" and "age" are socially-constructed concepts (that is, they are subjective - and therefore changeable -in origin) that require the ability to exercise power for their significance.
3. Thus, class is a primary form of stratification because it confers power, while concepts such as ethnicity are considered secondary forms of stratification because they require the presence in society of forms of power that can be exploited by one group over another.

We can briefly review a number of class-based theories of ethnic stratification in terms of the following categories:

- a. **Class Cultures**
- b. **Class Sub-cultures.**
- c. **Class Fractions.**
- d. **"Underclass" theory.**

1. Class Cultures.

Writers who advocate the classical Marxist notion of class theorised in terms of a "bourgeoisie / proletariat" dichotomy argue that, in order to analyse the relationship between social class and ethnicity, we should view the working class as having a set of common interests that derive from their relationship to the means of economic production.

This is sometimes expressed as a "**unitary**" concept of the working class (that is, this class, whatever the particular differences among its members, has, at root, a common class interest).

For such theorists, what matters most is an individual's **relationship to the means of production (primary stratification)** rather than **secondary forms** of stratification such as **ethnicity** or **gender** (since these forms of stratification are seen to be subservient to and consequently less theoretically significant than social class).

As **Westergaard and Resler** ("Class In Capitalist Society", 1976) argue in relation to ethnicity,

"Preoccupied with the disabilities that attach to colour, liberal reformers and research workers have been busy rediscovering what in fact are common disabilities of class; widespread and long-standing conditions inherent in the workings of capital, market and state in a divided society."

Briefly explain how the criticisms in the above could be applied to the concept of a "race relations industry" in our society.

Within this general theoretical category, the idea that any "minority group" (blacks, women, men or whatever) should be singled-out for special treatment is seen to be indicative of two main things:

Firstly, the acceptance of a **divisive ideology** that propagates the myth that "minorities" are **inherently** different to the "majority". In technical terms this involves a **"discourse of domination"**; that is, the idea that if we, as sociologists, begin our analysis by accepting the idea that blacks, women, the disabled, etc. are socially different, then we have to try to account for their differential treatment on the basis of qualities that they do - or do not - possess. In this respect, the argument here is that:

- a. "Ethnicity" is only a meaningful category if we apply it in a **discriminatory** manner (for example, that one ethnic group is superior to another).
- b. To adopt this concept as meaningful, therefore, means that we accept the implications involved in its use (which is not good sociology).
- c. To use such concepts means having to explain **why** one ethnic group is / is not superior to another (for example, we have to explain why West Indians, for example, achieve less in our education system than other "ethnic groups" in terms of what this group does or does not possess).

Writers such as **Westergaard and Resler** are arguing, therefore, that to use such concepts is a form of **bias**, since they are concepts that reflect a partial, highly subjective, view of the social world (one that reflects the interests of dominant (white) social groups / classes).

Secondly, following directly from the above idea, to accept the category of "ethnic group" as socially meaningful is, in itself, a way of perpetuating **racism**, since, by definition, to use the use means accepting that there are socially meaningful cultural differences between, for example, "blacks" and "whites".

Thus, to single-out West Indians, Chinese, Americans or whatever as somehow "different" or in need of "special attention" is both racist and ethnocentric, since by definition you classify the members of such groups as "disadvantaged" - and once you do this you have to think about what you might be helping such groups to achieve (assimilation into the bourgeoisie? The ability to pass unnoticed in "white society"?).

In basic terms, what writers who advocate the idea that questions of "ethnicity" are ultimately a **theoretical distraction** or blind-alleyway are saying is **not** that "ethnic differences" do not exist; rather, they are arguing that these differences are due to the operation of **class**, not "**ethnicity**". Therefore, we should analyse status differences in terms of an **objective concept** such as class, rather than a subjective (and racist) concept such as "ethnicity".

There are a few **criticisms** we can identify in relation to the above that will lead us into the next (Marxist) perspective on the relationship between class and ethnicity.

- a. Firstly, the "**unified working class**" theory does not adequately account for the fact that members of ethnic minorities are not simply confined to the working class - many are to be found among the middle classes in our society. However, what ethnic minorities have in common, regardless of class, is the fact that they suffer racial discrimination that is both real in fact and in its consequences.
- b. Secondly, to be "**colour-blind**" in this sense is to accept that there are no empirical differences between different ethnic groups in terms of their life chances and experiences. Critics of this view frequently site the fact that working class blacks suffer discrimination from working class whites.
- c. Thirdly, it doesn't adequately account for the fact that racial discrimination in employment exists at all, since why should a ruling class care whether they profit from the exploitation of black workers or white workers as long as they profit? In short, it is difficult to see why members of various ethnic minorities are not spread widely across the class structure rather than, as is the reality in our society, disproportionately represented at the very bottom of the class structure in the worst paid, lowest status and lowest skilled jobs.

The main problem, here, is that racial discrimination appears to be a potential dimension of stratification that may, at best, run parallel to class (a position adopt by some Black Marxists).

2. Class Sub-Cultures.

As we have just seen, writers such as **Westergaard and Resler** implicitly argue that we should theorise the nature of ethnic group stratification in class, as opposed to either biological or cultural terms.

Other Marxists, such as **Castles and Kosack** ("Immigrant Workers and Class Structure in Western Europe", 1973) have, however, taken a slightly different approach to the question of ethnic group stratification. In particular, such writers have focused upon the idea that the **working class** may, in some instances, be **split** into several different **class sub-cultures** (that is, smaller cultural groupings within the working class).

In their analysis of immigration patterns in post 2nd World War Europe, for example, **Castles and Kosack** emphasise the unequal economic development patterns throughout the continent (Germany, France and Britain, for example, have developed a level of economic prosperity that has far outstripped countries such as Greece and Turkey).

In **post-war Britain**, for example, living standards rose in combination with labour shortages created by the war. An "economic vacuum" was effectively created at the very bottom of the labour market and this was filled by encouraging immigration from Commonwealth countries (countries that had, historically, been part of the British Empire). Immigrants, in this respect, became part of what Marxists like to call a "reserve army of labour" in post-colonial Britain.

As immigrants were absorbed into the class structure, they entered through the working class and, according to **Castles and Kosack** such immigrants were seen by the working class **not** as potential "class allies" but rather as **potential competitors** for jobs that had been traditionally done by the working classes. As they note:

"In objective terms immigrant workers belong to the working class. But within this class they form a bottom stratum due to the subordinate status of their occupations."

Castles and Kosack argue, in this respect, that while the basic Marxist analysis of capitalist class relationships is **correct**, we need to recognise that, in **cultural terms**, the **working class** invariably **splits** into various **class-based sub-cultures** focused around **status differences** (in relation to type of job, ethnic background and so forth). In effect, they argue that the concept of status, theorised within the context of social class, is a significant one in relation to the explanation of ethnic group stratification.

In **status** terms, a **ruling class** (through various **agencies** such as the **mass media**) is able - because of its powerful social position - to exploit the opportunity presented by status considerations (encouraged through various forms of economic and social discrimination) to split the working class along ethnic lines and, by so doing,

- a. Contain class conflict by deflecting criticism away from a ruling class and onto socially and economically powerless groups ("blacks", "immigrants" etc).
- b. Continue to exploit "immigrants" as a reserve army of labour that can be brought into the labour force in times of economic boom and discarded in times of slump.
- c. Control the behaviour and wage levels of the working class with the threat of unemployment and the replacement by workers willing to work for lower wages.

3. Class Fractions.

A development of the above idea is the concept of "**class fractions**" (for example, **Miles** "Racism and Migrant Labour", 1982). This concept emphasises the idea that **social classes** are **neither homogenous, monolithic**, entities (that is, composed of people who see themselves as having everything in common with people in a similar objective class situation), **nor** simply **divided** on **cultural** lines. Rather, for someone like **Miles** social stratification is viewed in terms of groups of people who share the **same** economic (market) position but who are **divided** by status concepts such as **age, gender, skill, ethnic** background and the like.

Class fractions, according to writers such as **Miles** and **Poulantzas** ("Classes in Contemporary Capitalism", 1975), exist **within** each of the **two main classes**.

Racialised Class Fractions

A **significant** point to note here is that **ethnic groups** appear at **most levels** of the class structure. In Britain, for example, while **most** West Indians are working class there are also successful West Indian **intellectuals, professionals** and **entrepreneurs**.

According to this view, what this type of **class fraction** has in common is not only their **class** but also the fact that their **status** is "**racialised**"; middle class blacks, for example, have to contend with **racial discrimination** in a similar way to working class blacks. In this respect, therefore, middle class and working class blacks may have more in **common** with each other (their experience of status discrimination) than they have in common with whites of their own class - which adds an important dimension to the understanding of ethnic group stratification.

4. The "Underclass".

The concept of an "**underclass**" is one that appears in several theoretical perspectives in several, different, guises or interpretations. Usually it is associated with both **Weberian** and "**New Right**" perspectives (in, it should be noted, different ways) but, before we examine these in more detail, it will be useful to include a **Marxist interpretation** of this concept, for comparative purposes if nothing else.

The basic **concept** of an "**underclass**" involves the idea that those at the very bottom of the class structure form a stratum that is characterised by such things as **poverty, political marginalization, criminality, welfare/ charity dependence** and so forth.

Some writers go as far as to suggest that the underclass may actually be **outside** the "normal" class structure, since people in this position tend to have no real chance of ever escaping from this social position, while others have argued that this concept has little actual validity because an underclass does **not**, as such, exist.

To investigate this idea further, there are three basic perspectives at which we can briefly look.

A. Marxist Conceptions of an Underclass.

Marx used the concept of an underclass, in his analysis of Victorian Britain, in terms of the idea of a "**lumpen-proletariat**" - a class category that he saw being drawn mainly from the very dregs of society. As he termed members of this class,

"The 'dangerous class', the social scum, the passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of...society".

Neo-Marxists such as **Paul Q. Hirst** ("Marx and Engels on Law, Crime and Morality", 1975) has further characterised the **lumpen-proletariat** as,

"...a parasitic class, living off productive labour by theft, extortion and beggary, or providing 'services' such as prostitution and gambling, their class interests are diametrically opposed to the workers."

For most Marxists, therefore, an underclass has **two main characteristics**:

1. Its members **produce nothing** and are not, therefore, considered part of the working class. On the contrary, such people are seen to be **exploiters** of the working class by "**illegal**" means, just as a ruling class exploits by **legal** means.
2. They are seen to be **politically reactionary**, aligning themselves with the bourgeoisie they wish to join, rather than with a working class that they attempt to exploit.

This first definition of an underclass is very **different** to its subsequent use by both Weberian and New Right writers, since for Marxists an underclass consists of people who have two main characteristics:

- a. They attempt to gain a living by **exploiting** others (through crime and the like).
- b. They exist on the **margins of all social classes**, not simply at the very bottom of the class structure (since some members of this class will be reasonably successful in their "work").

The **underclass** does **not**, in this interpretation, include people who are **marginalized** in society by **poverty, unemployment, illness, sexual and racial discrimination** and so forth, since these are **potentially productive members** of society (people who want to be productive) whose needs are simply stifled by the nature of capitalist exploitation.

Miles ("Racism and Migrant Labour", 1982) adopts the above point-of-view when he attempts to reject the non-Marxist use of the concept, as it has been applied to ethnic minorities in particular, by noting that:

- a. Asian-Caribbean's, for example, cannot be considered a group "outside the class structure", since members of this group are represented right across the class structure (although they are predominantly working class).
- b. Although Asian-Caribbean's are disproportionately represented among the poor in our society, this fact alone does **not** make them an underclass.

We will develop these ideas in a moment when we look at alternative concepts of an underclass.

B. Status Based Theories of Ethnic Inequality.

The theme of an "underclass" is continued in this section, even though we have switched the focus of attention slightly from explanations of ethnic group stratification based around the concept of class to explanations that centre upon the concept of **status**.

We can begin by looking at a range of "**New Right**" ideas (by which is meant various writers whose defining characteristic is their political conservatism and economic liberalism) about the nature, extent and consequences of the existence of an underclass in modern industrial societies.

New Right Conceptions of an Underclass.

At the opposite extreme to Marxism (both politically and theoretically) we find a group of **Neo-conservative** writers who have argued not only that an **underclass exists** in societies such as **Britain** and **America**, but also that it **represents a major threat** to the **stability** of such societies.

For the New Right, an underclass is generally **defined** as those people who exist at the **very bottom of the class structure** and such writers tend to adopt what might be termed an "**inclusive**", (rather than the "**exclusive**" view adopted by most Marxists) view of this **class**.

"**Inclusive**" means that such writers argue that everyone whose social position puts them in the poorest section of the population is a member of an underclass.

"**Exclusive**" means that writers holding this view argue that membership of an underclass should not simply be created by definition (for example, everyone defined as "very poor" or people living off state benefits being defined as belonging to an underclass). For Marxists, membership of an underclass is restricted to a relatively small number of (largely criminal) people.

As opposed to the Marxist view, the **New Right** see underclass membership largely in **status** terms - the underclass is, by definition, those at the bottom of the class structure with the lowest social status. In terms of membership of this class, writers such as **Peter Saunders** in Britain ("Social Class and Stratification", 1990) and **Charles Murray** in America have attempted to define it in terms of such people as:

The poor,
The unqualified,
Those who are irregularly or never employed.

Disproportionately represented amongst this class are:

Afro-Caribbean's,
People trapped in run-down council estates or decaying inner cities,
Young single people,
Single-parent families.

According to **Murray**, there is a **positive correlation** between membership of the **underclass** and **high rates of illegitimacy** and **family breakdown**, **violent crime** and **juvenile delinquency**, the **lack of a "work ethic"** (what **Saunders'** calls a "**dependency culture**" - a reliance on State handouts, charity, etc.) and so forth.

In relation to **ethnicity**, **New Right** theorists generally see the fact of a "**disproportionate membership**" of **ethnic minorities** in the **underclass** as evidence **not** of things like exploitation, discrimination and the like, but rather as evidence of various **failings** amongst ethnic groups. These failings include:

a. Cultural Organisation.

There are a variety of different aspects to this:

The idea that "immigrants" **fail to assimilate** into the receiving culture, casting themselves in the role of **outsiders**.

The idea that ethnic minorities tend to develop a "**culture of poverty**". The idea being that ethnic minorities fail to escape from poverty because their cultural organisation and development somehow "holds them back".

The idea that ethnic minorities suffer from a "**cycle of deprivation**" - lack of employment opportunities leads to failure to secure decent housing which in turn means these groups suffer greater and more severe illnesses, which lessens their employment prospects and so on...

b. Family Organisation.

Some, but not all, ethnic minorities are seen to contribute to their relative failure by adopting (through choice or necessity) a family form that is seen to disadvantage them within the **labour market**. The high incidence of **single-parent families**, for example, is held to result in a form of "**welfare dependence**", whereby women and children especially grow-up within a cultural setting where "work" has little meaning.

This argument is often directed at Afro-Caribbean family life, for example, where the incidence of female-led single-parent families can be relatively high. However, it also ignores the fact that in such family groups the extended family tends to play a central and significant role.

c. Welfare Dependency.

As members of an underclass, ethnic minorities, according to writers such as **Saunders**, develop a **passive** and **fatalistic** acceptance of their poverty and failure to become socially mobile. They are, in effect, trapped in a **cycle of poverty** and **deprivation** from which it is impossible to escape (hence their alleged fatalism).

It is fairly evident that not only are the "explanations" produced by New Right writers **devoid** of any real **empirical validity** (its fairly easy to show, for example, that ethnic minorities do **not** live in a "culture of poverty", **nor** do they "fatalistically accept their poverty"), but they carry with them a clear smell of the kind of **racism** that seeks to **blame** ethnic minorities for their "failure" to better themselves socially.

The concept of "welfare dependency", for example, also carries with it the associated idea that "welfare payments" should **cease**, supposedly making people "stand on their own two feet" - the implication being that here we have a large group of people who are not only **happy** with their general situation, they **positively glory** in it.

As I have suggested, one of the main arguments advanced by New Right theorists to explain the fact that ethnic minority groups are, in the main, bunched at the very bottom of the class structure is their supposed **failure** to "**assimilate** themselves" into the dominant norms of values of a society. This, in effect, means that ethnic groups are **not integrated** into the general structure of a society and such groups are effectively **excluded** from participation in the "normally expected" standard of living in society.

While this "assimilation" argument is clearly **not** applicable to all societies on an empirical level (countries such as Germany, for example, have tended to treat immigrants as "temporary workers" rather than citizens with full political rights), it should be applicable theoretically to all societies where a colonial past, for example, has resulted in widespread immigration.

Problems with this type of argument centre around the assumption that there is a set of dominant cultural norms and values, to which there is widespread adherence, amongst an indigenous population. These norms and values would include such things as:

A sense of nationality and nationhood,
A common language,
Common cultural norms of behaviour,
and so forth.

Two responses can be made to this argument:

- a. Firstly, if "dominant cultural norms and values" **cannot** be adequately theorised, then the existence or otherwise of such a dominant culture becomes fairly meaningless.
- b. If "dominant cultural norms and values" **can** be adequately theorised then it is difficult to see how, for example, second and third generation ethnic minority individuals can fail to have become socialised into these dominant norms and values.

Either way, the "failure to assimilate" argument breaks down.

Weberian Perspectives.

Sociologists writing from a Weberian perspective have probably been most responsible for the development of the "underclass thesis" in relation to ethnic group stratification (even though, as we have seen, various New Right authors have attempted to develop a variant on the thesis to explain the position of many "disadvantaged" social groups - mainly in terms which effectively "blame the victims" for their own misfortune).

Considering, as we have further seen, the emphasis that Weberian sociologists place upon the related and inter-dependent concepts of **class, status and party** (organised political power) in explaining social stratification generally, this should not be very surprising. Weberian sociologists also tend to take a more open-minded view of the underclass when compared with the forms of analysis produced by New Right writers.

In terms of the basic Weberian categories noted above, we can relate them to ethnicity in the following ways.

1. Class:

Ethnic minorities are concentrated in low pay, low skill, non-unionised work, as well as having a disproportionate presence amongst the unemployed.

2. Status:

Racial discrimination is a form of status discrimination (since an individual is considered to have a lower social status if he or she is a member of a "despised / hated" social group). In this respect, discrimination:

- a. Lowers the status of ethnic minorities and contributes towards their differential treatment in all areas of society (especially employment).
- b. Prevents integration of ethnic minorities by forcing ethnic groups to find status within their own particular cultural groupings.

3. Party / Power:

Ethnic groups tend to be **politically marginalized**:

- a. Trade Unions find it difficult to recruit amongst ethnic minorities because the nature of their employment tends to be in small, non-unionised, companies.
- b. No major political party in Britain represents directly the interests of ethnic minorities. In general, most ethnic minorities tend to lend their support to the Labour Party, although both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party attract some support.

In Weberian terms, **ethnic groups** in Britain have tended to occupy a "**weak market position**"; on the one hand, most **lack** the technical **skills** and **qualifications** required to improve this situation whilst on the other they suffer a higher level of implicit and explicit **racial discrimination**. The two are not, of course, unconnected.

Thinking in terms of a **combination of class, status and power**, the position of ethnic groups tends to be low, contributing to what **Rex and Tomlinson** ("Colonial Immigrants in a British City", 1979) have argued is an underclass - a group at the very bottom of the class structure.

For **Rex and Tomlinson** ethnic minority groups alone do not constitute an underclass - numerous other "minority groups" (the disabled, elderly, chronically ill, women...) find themselves in a similar situation.

Rex and Tomlinson justify their argument for the existence of an underclass by claiming that one of its characteristics is the **inability** of its members to "**escape**" from it (that is, **to improve their market situation**), mainly because of the way in which employment policies and laws and labour markets have developed.

In this respect, they use the theory of a "**dual labour market**" to illustrate this point, which involves the split between:

- a. The "**primary**" labour market - consisting of relatively secure, well-paid, long-term employment that has some kind of career structure.
- b. The "**secondary**" labour market - consisting of low-wages, poor conditions, no job security, training or promotion prospects.

Members of the **underclass** are **highly concentrated** in the **secondary labour market**, which in turn creates a situation in which the **social stigma** attached to working in this sector tends to **reinforce** the lower social status on an underclass.

Empirically, it is not difficult to produce evidence that substantiates this basic argument. However, while it is certainly true that many ethnic minority groups do find themselves at the bottom of the class structure, it is **by no means proven** that they are, in consequence, part of an underclass.

As **Braham** ("Class, Race and Immigration", 1980) has argued,

"To say that skin colour involves a number of disadvantages is not to say that all black people occupy the same position in the labour market, and to establish that black workers are concentrated in less skilled jobs is not to establish the existence of a black 'underclass'."

In addition, it is possible to argue – and demonstrate - that ethnic minorities are represented at all levels of the class structure. However, their level of overall representation is less than one might statistically expect (although we have to be aware that other factors, such as class membership, may be significant here). It is also probable, however, that discrimination on racial grounds influences the ability of ethnic minorities to enter middle class occupations.

The “Underclass” Thesis Examined.

The underclass thesis (in either its "New Right" or "Weberian" forms) does not appear to be a particularly valid way of characterising ethnic stratification (the idea of a "racialised class fraction", for example, would appear to be a better way of explaining the position of ethnic minorities in the class structure because it allows for the fact that some members of ethnic minorities are social mobile).

What is indisputable, however, is the relationship between "minority status" in terms of ethnicity and a high level of economic, political and social marginalization, not the least because the dimension of **racism** is a powerful social force.

The concept of an underclass is, perhaps, in danger of becoming accepted - both by sociologists and people-at-large – almost by **default**. That is, if people talk about it and write about it enough then it assumes some sort of validity. The adage “**There’s no smoke without fire**” springs to mind in this context.

However, simply because we talk about something “as if” it exists doesn’t mean to say that it does (the pioneering work of sundry Interactionist and Post-Modernist writers notwithstanding...). In the concluding section, therefore, we can look briefly at the concept of “an underclass” (how it is theorised / characterised) and, more importantly, the evidence to support or invalidate the use of this concept.

In **America**, the “underclass debate” has been dominated by writers such as **Charles Murray** (at the respectable, academic end at least). In “The Underclass Revisited” 1999, for example, **Murray** argues that one “proof” of the existence of such a class is the extent to which American society is becoming what he terms a “**custodial democracy**”; in basic terms, America is imprisoning more and more “members of the underclass” so that the “law-abiding majority” are able to “enjoy democracy”.

In **Britain**, the underclass debate has, in the past couple of years, been framed in terms of “**Social Inclusion / Exclusion**”. **Tony Blair**, for example, has talked frequently about the need for **social inclusion** and has even gone so far as to establish a Government Department to investigate ways of promoting social inclusion.

In this respect, **Social Exclusion** (as defined by Katherine **Duffy**: “Social Exclusion and Human Dignity in Europe”, 1995) involves the:

“**Inability to participate in the economic, political, social and cultural life of a society**”

(and if you think this sounds a bit like a definition of **relative poverty**, you’d probably be right).

According to **Robert Moore**, the British debate over social exclusion has tended to coalesce around three main political groupings, all of whom basically agree that social exclusion exists but who, as you might expect, differ greatly in their prescriptions for its removal.

These loose groupings can be noted as follows:

a. The Political Left.

Social exclusion is seen to be a problem of economic **poverty** and it's removal requires a fundamental **restructuring of society** and **redistribution of wealth**.

b. The "Middle Ground"

For this group (which would include the current **Labour Government and Opposition parties**), the problem of exclusion is seen in the **Durkheimian** notion of **social integration** (which shouldn't be too much of a surprise given that so much of modern political debate in Britain has as Functionalist aura). In this respect, **paid work** is seen as the means to ensure **social integration** and, by extension, **inclusion**.

A problem here, of course, is that "unpaid and low-paid workers" may well be in full-time work without receiving the same level of benefit as other workers.

c. The Political (New) Right

For this group, an underclass is defined in terms of a variety of **moral, cultural** and **individual** terms. Membership of the underclass, using this definition, is **fluid**, in the sense that a wide variety of "**morally undesirable**" groups and individuals can be safely accommodated in this category. In recent times, for example, the **media** in Britain have characterised such diverse groups as:

"Joy riders, Ram raiders, Meth's drinkers, Single mothers, the Unemployed, the Long-term unemployed, Black youths, Benefit claimants and Hunt saboteurs"

as belonging to an underclass.

Evidence

If the terms of the debate over social exclusion have a tendency to be vague (reflecting, perhaps, the idea that the concept tends to be used more as a stick with which to beat "undesirable social elements"), the evidence relating to an underclass is actually quite emphatically clear; in a nutshell, it's very difficult, if not impossible, to find evidence that an underclass of permanently excluded outsiders actually exists. To put this another way, **Robert Moore** has concluded:

"The underclass is invisible because it doesn't exist..."

Buck in "Understanding the Underclass", 1992, edited by David Smith, for example, argues that the economic evidence for the existence of an underclass is very thin. In particular, unemployment varies with economic cycles, which means that people may experience periods of semi-regular employment / unemployment, but not the permanent unemployment predicted by underclass theories. **Buck** characterises people who experience this type of employment pattern as:

"Unstable members of the working class, not stable members of an underclass".

Heath (“The Attitudes of The Underclass” – also in Smith) likewise found **little or no evidence** of a **permanently excluded group** of people who could constitute an underclass. He found that amongst the supposed “underclass”, such people were actually **more likely** to want work, less fussy about the types of jobs they took and no-less active in the political process than other groups (68% voted in the previous election, for example).

Similarly, **Dean and Taylor-Gooby** (1992) found **little or no evidence** of a “**dependency culture**” amongst **welfare claimants**. Instead, they found **high levels of motivation to work** (the main problems were finding it and, most importantly, the levels of wages they would receive) and that the claimants they researched were a **heterogeneous group**, their **diversity** extending to the fact that a proportion of claimants had punitive attitudes towards claimants...

What **Dean and Taylor-Gooby** found evidence of was **not** “an underclass”, but a **poverty trap** where, for example, very high marginal rates of tax (that is, the more you earn, the more state benefits are lost – in a low-wage economy, for example, people may be paid very little more for a week’s work than if they simply claimed welfare. This is not a problem of high welfare payments; rather it’s a problem of low wages and a punitive benefit system), lead to an acceptance of “cash-in-hand” work (something that benefits some employers).

It also needs to be noted, in this context, that the concept of a “**culture of dependency**” is an example of the way ideas can mean different things in different contexts. For example, we could characterise **all** social life as involving some form of “culture of dependency” since it is evident that any society requires its members to form dependent relationships (over such things as care for the sick, the old and the very young). We would not, for example, characterise (and implicitly criticise) the very young for the “culture of dependency” surrounding their care and nurture...

Similarly, as **Le Grand** has argued, **all** social classes, to greater or lesser extents, are involved in some form of **dependency culture**. We only have to think about the range of **tax relief** and benefits enjoyed by the very **rich**, or the “**middle class welfare state**” (mortgage tax relief, for example) that provides cheap health care and education, to illustrate this particular point.

Finally, **Le Grand et al** (“Social Exclusion in Britain”, 1999) used a sample of **9000 respondents** to test the extent of social inclusion / exclusion, using five **indicators**:

1. **Active engagement in consumption**
2. **Savings**
3. **Productive paid work**
4. **Political attachment / involvement**
5. **Social interaction.**

Using these “**dimensions of social exclusion**”, **Le Grand et al** found that in terms of their sample:

50% were never excluded from each of the five dimensions.
25% were excluded from one dimension.
02% were excluded from four dimensions.
Less than 1% had been excluded on all five dimensions for at least five years.

On the basis of this research, **Le Grand et al** concluded that there was only **slight and possibly ambiguous evidence** for the existence of an underclass as defined by writers such as Murray.

They also concluded that the number of people who could possibly be defined as “an underclass” were so small that they could not be characterised as a “threat” to social stability (as Murray, for example, has loudly and repeatedly claimed them to be...).