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Capturing people to serve as slaves in the New World is portrayed in this work by Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

relationships in capitalist societies are often more complex and hidden—for example, workers at a major corporation may never meet the owners of that corporation; people who work for government are only indirectly tied to the profit-making system. Thus the class nature of a society such as that in the United States is not immediately apparent to people living in that society.

Class Systems in American History

In any real society, also, the class system tends to be more complex than that of a theoretical society that is purely of one type or another. This is true because class relationships that were predominant under one type of society survive as minority classes once a new type of society emerges. For example, when the United States was founded there were three basic class systems. One was a system of self-employed farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers. Members of this class worked for themselves and sold their products on the free market. To the extent that they suffered from class exploitation, it was from bankers who lent them money at exorbitant rates, or from government officials who taxed them excessively, or from big merchants or middlemen who paid them too little for their produce and charged them too much for the goods they had to buy. There is still considerable nostalgia in the United States for this small-town or rural society of independent producers, although self-employed in-

dividuals today are a small proportion of the population. Marxists refer to this group of self-employed workers as the independent *petit bourgeoisie* (a French term that acquired special political-economic connotations in French history).

A second class system that existed historically in the United States was the slave system. This system was polarized between masters and slaves. It was concentrated in the South prior to the Civil War. The relationship between the master and slave under this system determined the whole nature of the Southern social and economic system, its ideology, its politics, its military organization, its family forms, etc. Slavery meant that only certain crops could be grown under certain conditions, it meant that the South was inherently expansionist, it meant that there were real constraints on industrialization, and it meant that the slaveholders would develop a sense of "aristocracy" and paternalism. The slave system was formally abolished after the Civil War, but remnants of it were reestablished under the Jim Crow system in the South, with sharecropping and other arrangements being used by the landowning white population to extract cheap labor from the black population. As we shall see in Chapter 11, racial patterns that grew out of this system still have a major impact in the United States.

A third class system that has existed in the United States since colonial days is the capitalist system. The two main classes in this system are the owning capitalist class and the nonowning working class. This class system was imported from England and grew rapidly in the United States and in other settler societies (Canada, Australia, etc.), where there was no old aristocratic class to oppose it. Capitalist relations of production tend to grow out of *petit bourgeois* relations of production because of the functioning of the competitive system. As some small producers become more efficient, or develop new techniques of production, they grow in size and hire more workers. The larger they get, the more efficient they become because of certain *economies of scale* (processes whereby it is cheaper on a per item basis to produce 1,000 items of something than to produce 10 or 100). Gradually, the larger producers force the smaller producers out of business. The entrepreneur who started the business, and in the early days did much of the work himself, becomes a capitalist who hires others to do the work. The capitalist system of productive relations has grown to the point where it is by far the predominant system in the United States. The *petit bourgeois* system of production survives primarily in marginal sectors of the economy, particularly in service industries where personal relationships between seller and customer are important.

Class Divisions in Advanced Capitalism

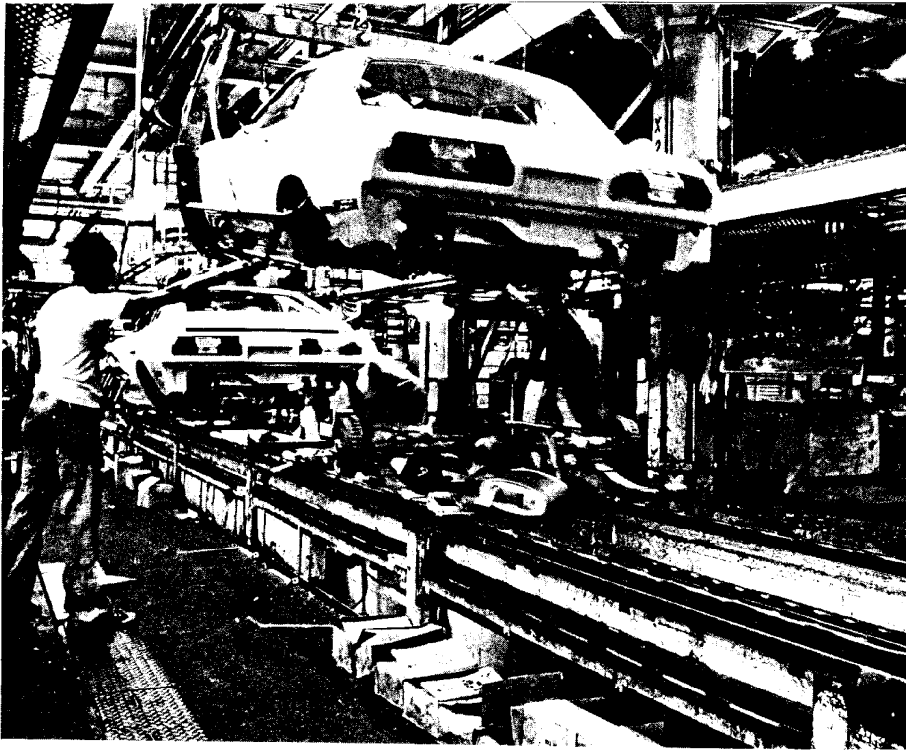
As capitalist industries grow, they tend to create new divisions in the class system. Large, complex organizations require a large group of professional managers to run things. These managers tend to be better paid than other workers, and because of the



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As recently as two generations ago independent farming families were a major group in American society.





Courtesy Ford Motor Company

Industrial production is the core of the contemporary capitalist economy.

nature of their work have a good deal of control over what happens. Thus, they tend to grow into a separate class, a class that is in the middle between the workers and the owners. As society becomes more technically complex, it requires a better-educated population. It requires advanced medical and social service systems. These employees in education and the social services tend to be paid by the state, as do military officers and other civil service employees. They typically must obtain advanced educational credentials in order to obtain their positions. They, too, have a greater degree of control over their working conditions than do the masses of workers, and they control the labor of workers such as secretaries, assistants, janitors, etc. They thus are part of the middle class.

There are other divisions that tend to arise within the major classes in a capitalist society. There may be a division between bankers and merchants who merely circulate money and commodities and industrial capitalists who control industries that actually produce things. There is a division between manual workers who work with their hands and white-collar workers who do not. (It is important to remember that both manual and nonmanual workers use their heads.) These divisions are very complex, and tend to change as economic conditions change. Today, for example, we see that white-collar workers and professionals are tending to lose their middle-class status and find that their educational credentials no longer give them a privileged position different from that of less-educated manual workers.

The significance of these divisions within the class system in the United States is a highly controversial subject within radical sociology. Some writers adhere to a "new working class theory" and assert that college-educated professionals will be the most central exploited group in the capitalist society of the future. Others argue that these professionals are part of the *petit bourgeoisie* because of their middle-class life styles and their economic interest in preserving the privileges they have sustained under the present system. This issue will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 5, where we will also discuss the theory of social class more systematically.

The class system in the United States is constantly changing because of contradictions built into the capitalist economy. As corporations grow, they tend to form monopolies (or oligopolies, where a small number of producers together dominate a market). Inflation tends to increase. Government spending has to be increased to attempt to avoid a depression and to support the people who are thrown out of work by the tendency of capitalist industries to cut their labor force in order to make greater profits. This government spending creates a large class of state employees, many of whom aspire to middle-class careers for their children. The educational system is expanded as a means of giving people an opportunity for social mobility, but the number of jobs for educated people is stable or shrinks.

The capitalist system has been the most volatile system of relations of production in human history. In their never-ending search for higher profits, capitalists have brought about tremendous technological advances. A whole new class of industrial workers was created by capitalism. Societies became predominantly urban, and dependent on fossil fuels for energy. In order to motivate people to work within this system, promises of a better future were held out to entire populations. Rational thought was encouraged at the expense of tradition and mysticism. Thus, capitalism was an essential stage in human history; a stage that built the foundations for a better society in the future. Capitalism also created the contradictions that will make that better society possible. The germs of a new society are always present within the old. Understanding this potential for change in our society is only possible when we understand how the society is shaped by the relations of production that created it and that make further changes inevitable.

Summary

Radical sociology is based on a dialectical theory of knowledge. This means that knowledge is shaped by social reality, while at the same time our understanding of social reality is shaped by ideas. Sociological ideas must be tested both through scientific research and through applied practice, if they are to be objectively valid. While it is possible to formulate sociological laws that are valid on a wide range of levels of analysis, radical sociologists have found that it is most effective to formulate laws that

apply to a specific type of society, such as capitalist society. On this level it is possible to specify the functions each element of society makes towards sustaining the system. At the same time, it is possible to study how each element of society contributes to social conflict and to the eventual breakdown of one type of society and its transformation into a new type.

Societies are inherently contradictory. This means that their normal operations generate forces that undermine their functioning and lead to social transformation. Societies are created to meet the basic needs of the people who belong to them. But once societies are created, they have a life of their own, and develop characteristics that are oppressive to many or most of the people who belong to them. The division of societies into social classes is oppressive to the majority of people who find themselves on the bottom, yet it survives because it is in the interest of those who exercise power. Dominant social classes often play a progressive role in developing new technologies and relationships of production, yet by so doing they create conditions that make them obsolete.

In its history, the United States has had three major class systems: the slave system, the system of self-employed producers, and the capitalist system. The first of these has been abolished, the second has sharply declined, while the third has become dominant and undergone a transition from competitive to monopoly capitalism.

Review Questions

1. In what ways can sociological ideas be tested through practice?
2. Explain the concept of contradiction. What contradictions can you think of that are inherent in the social structure of the United States?
3. What are some differences between the social sciences and the physical sciences?
4. Which level of analysis tends to be the most effective for sociology? Why?
5. Make a list of occupations, including high-paying and prestigious ones such as with the conservative use of functionalist analysis?
6. Is Marxist sociology materialist or idealist?
7. What are the basic integrative imperatives that must be met for a society to survive? How do these differ from meeting the needs of individuals in the society?
8. Is it possible for a social institution to fulfill functions on different levels of social organization? How?
9. How do liberal and radical sociologists differ in their analysis of the functions of social stratification?
10. What is the difference between use value and exchange value? How is each determined?

- 11 What are the different ways in which power can be exercised?
- 12 What was the chief form of the division of labor in primitive societies?
- 13 What three class systems have existed in the United States since its founding?
- 14 Which groups make up the middle class in advanced capitalist societies?

Suggestions for Further Study

- 1 Choose a specific institutional feature of American society, such as the educational system, the police force, the corporate economy, the churches, the family patterns, etc. Make a list of as many functions you can think of that this institution plays for the maintenance of American capitalist society. Be sure to list not only the obvious functions admitted by those in control of the institution, but also more subtle and less obvious functions. Now make up a second list of all the "dysfunctions." That is, of all the ways the same institution tends to interfere with the orderly functioning of society, creating conflict and pressures for change. Compare your list with those of other members of the class.
- 2 The dominant relations of production in American society have changed markedly during the last one hundred years. This means that these changes can often be observed in the generational history of specific families. With the help of your parents and grandparents, trace your family tree back for as many generations as possible. For each adult member of the family, indicate his or her relationship to the means of production, whether employer, worker in a capitalist firm, self-employed farmer or craftsman, slave, slave owner, housewife, etc. How do the changes in your family reflect more general changes in the structure of society?
- 3 Make a list of all the social factors that have shaped your life and made you the kind of person you are. Consider the neighborhood you lived in, the type of friends you have had, the schooling you have had, the economic circumstances you have experienced, the mass media you have been exposed to, your religious experiences, etc. Discuss how your personality, attitudes, and opinions have been shaped by these social experiences.
- 4 Find a book that portrays life under social conditions markedly different from those with which you are personally familiar. For example, a novel portraying life on a slave-owning plantation in the South or on a medieval manor in Europe. Write an essay showing how people's lives differed because of the social conditions there.
- 5 Make a list of occupations, including high-paying and prestigious ones such as physician and lawyer, and less prestigious and poorly paid ones such as factory worker or secretary. Make a list of the functions that members of these occupa-

tions fulfill for society. What would happen if all members of this occupation were to withhold their services for a week, a month, or a year? Are the rewards received by people in each occupation commensurate with the contribution they make? If we paid less money to the higher-paid occupations, would they attract less qualified and motivated people? Are there occupations that are completely unnecessary? If so, why do they survive?

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