BY STRATIFICATION OF THE U.S. WORKING CLASSES:

A REVIEW ESSAY--June 1987

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By all but the most narrow definitions, the working class constitutes the majority of the U.S. population. It therefore follows that its actual size, structure, and political consciousness is of fundamental importance to those, regardless of political perspective, who make it their business to understand and affect U.S. society and politics. Historically, but especially since WWII, the U.S. labor movement has been notoriously backward, more often than not a staunch ally of the domestic and foreign policy of the capitalist class. In light of the present-day restructuring of the world and U.S. economies and its effect on U.S. society, however, considerable change in the structure and condition of the working class may be in the offing. Hence, this topic has recently assumed increased political and sociological relevance.

Five major approaches to working class stratification have dominated recent U.S. literature on the subject: (Gordon, Reich and Edwards, pp.4–5). One is the theory of “postindustrial society” which argues that the former polarization of capitalists and workers is giving way to an overwhelming middle class which encompasses almost everyone and signals the end of poverty. (See Blumberg, Chapter 1). The second is the view that the working class is constantly being homogenized and that divisions within it are only temporary and not deeply rooted. A third strand is that of the new wave of social historians, inspired by the work of Herbert Gutman, whose empirical studies have contributed much but who have generally avoided theory altogether. Fourth, there are the institutional labor economists, such as Clark Kerr, Michael Piore and Peter Drucker. These economists generally hail the cooperative collective bargaining system in the U.S., but also originated the idea of labor market segmentation, especially between unionized and non-union sectors. (See Cain) This theory has been built upon and elaborated by a fifth strand of scholars, radical economists led by David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich, whose work we will examine later in this essay.

This essay is an initial attempt to identify some of the major issues involved in the study of the U.S. working class, especially the divisions within it, from a Marxist perspective. Although the first part of the essay reviews some empirical issues, the main focus will be on issues of theory.

In part I, I will examine the concepts and facts involved in two current sociological debates with key policy implications: the debate over the “shrinking middle class” and the discussion of the “underclass.” In part II, I will reconstruct the theoretical framework of the Marx, Engels, and, especially, Lenin as regards divisions internal to the working class, and make a brief attempt to apply Lenin’s theory of the labor aristocracy and of national
privilege to the U.S. In part III, I will critique certain contemporary Marxist analyses of the working class, commenting very briefly on the work of Harry Braverman, Erik Olin Wright and Nicos Poulantzas. I will spend more time reviewing the influential theory of labor market segmentation developed by David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich. In part IV I shall examine the interesting recent work of the Weberian sociologist William Form.

The exploratory character of this essay must be underscored. Even within its narrow scope I barely mention some crucial work, such as that of Harry Braverman. And I have only highlighted the broad contours of the work of Lenin, Form, and Gordon, et al. whose studies deserve much more comprehensive treatment. However, it is hoped that the review that follows will indicate directions for future theoretical and empirical research into the stratification of the U.S. working class.

1. Mainstream Controversies: the Middle Class and the Underclass

The controversies over the "shrinking middle class" and the "underclass" are quite complex, both theoretically and empirically. My purpose in tracing these debates is to underscore the currency of the study of the stratification of the working class, to draw out pertinent empirical facts that bear on the situation of the working class, and to discuss the content and relevance of the categories "middle class" and "underclass."

A. The Middle Class

The debate over the "shrinking middle class" touches a central political concern of mainstream academics and policy makers. This is because a large and growing middle class—as opposed to a society polarized between rich and poor—is considered the crucial social foundation for capitalist political stability. Also, a shrinkage of the middle class might indicate problems in economic demand and thus threaten long term economic prosperity.

Although Weber cannot be credited with endowing "middle class" with its present meaning, (in his own time the term usually referred to the bourgeoisie, as against the aristocracy and the laboring people), the concept is a triumph of modern Weberian thinking. Coined amidst post-WWI economic upswing and flourishing in post WWI prosperity, in essence the middle class (and its associated upper and lower classes) is a status concept—i.e. a concept of consumption (i.e. standard of living). Its classic measure is income (either a percentage range of the median such as 75% to 125%, or a range of absolute incomes such as $20,000–$50,000), regardless of one's role in the process of production. Moreover, as Weber hoped, this status concept has often cross-cut and mitigated classes and class struggle as a basis for political action in times of economic prosperity; i.e., when the middle class was growing.

In Marxist terms, the concept of middle class in the U.S. embraces much of the petit bourgeoisie, all of the upper layers of
the working class, and a significant chunk of the middle layers of the working class. Hence its relevance to studies of the stratification of the U.S. working class. The middle class can thus be viewed as designating those non-capitalists that benefit substantially from living in the world's leading capitalist power; i.e. who achieve a rising and comfortable standard of living which, it should be remembered, is highly unusual for workers on a world scale and somewhat rare even in other advanced capitalist countries. Thus it would be wrong, not to speak of futile, for Marxists to attempt to discard the concept because it is "bourgeois." Bourgeois it is, but lacking in social objectivity and political relevance it is not. Mainstream social scientists and policy makers are certainly correct in worrying about the shrinking middle class. Marxists are well-advised to follow these trends as well, for within them lay important information about the economy, the state and structure of the working class and petit bourgeoisie, and socio-economic policy.

The present debate over the middle class heated up as data piled up that pointed to a definite rise in inequality and dwindling of the middle class. (Koepp, Kuttnar, Thurow, Bradbury) A central role was played by Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison whose study showed that 58% of all jobs generated from 1979-1984 were low-wage jobs (defined as 50% or less of median income, or $7000 or less), as opposed to only 20% of new jobs between 1973 and 1979. Bluestone and Harrison perceived a structural change in the U.S. economy (which they called "deindustrialization"), whose results included a rise in inequality and low-wage jobs. Liberals such as Robert Kuttnar and Lester Thurow, among others, followed this study with others that showed a shrinking middle class and argued that this phenomenon was a significant secular trend with deep roots. Conservatives counterattacked, arguing that the shrinking middle class was purely a result of the business cycle (Janet Norwood), that it was based on demographic trends such as the unusual competition for jobs due to the baby boom generation that would soon disappear (Robert Lawrence). Such prestigious conservatives as Robert Samuelson, Neal Rosenthal and Warren Brookes argued that, in Samuelson's words, "the notion that the U.S. economy is producing mostly low-paying unskilled jobs is an economic fiction."

Katherine L. Bradbury has convincingly refuted the demographic explanations of the shrinking middle class, and Bluestone and Harrison's data on new jobs have withstood challenge. It therefore appears that important changes are underway that are increasing inequality, bottlenecking upward mobility and narrowing the middle class.

Some of the key findings may be summarized as follows:

1. Inequality. In 1985 the top 20% garnered 43.5% of total income, the highest recorded since this statistic was first compiled in 1947. The bottom 60% received only 32.4% of total income, their lowest figure ever. Excluding real estate, the top
2% hold 54% of all financial assets while the bottom 55% of the population have either zero or negative assets. By contrast, Japan has 1/2 as much inequality as the U.S. (Thurow, 1987, p. 30, 35)

2. The Middle Class. Thurow asserts that the number of middle income male jobs (defined as those who earn between 75% and 125% of the median income) declined from 23.4% in 1976 to 20.3% in 1985. (p.30) Bradbury, using the preferable method of defining middle class in absolute income terms ($20,000-$49,999 in 1984 dollars) found that the middle class shrank from 53% in 1973 to 47.9% in 1984. Congruently, those with incomes below $20,000 rose from 32.1% to 35.4% (p.45) Stephen Koepp defined the middle class as those earning between $15,000 and $49,999 and calculated that the middle class fell from 65.1% in 1970 to 58.2% in 1985.

3. Economic Indicators. Bluestone and Harrison's data that 58% of all jobs generated from 1979-1984 paid less than 1/2 the median wage is a statistical representation of an important structural shift in the economy. Lower paying, largely service sector jobs are replacing better paying manufacturing jobs. One element of this structural shift is the rise of highly productive new technology that has eliminated many manufacturing jobs. However, it is also a result of rising international competition, symbolized by the annual U.S. trade deficit of $170 billion. Thurow estimates that such a deficit accounts for 4 million lost jobs. Since exporting industries and industries that compete with imports pay higher wages ($18,637 and $19,583 v. the median of $16,168) and are more equitable in their pay structure than are jobs in other sectors, Thurow concludes that international competition is one of the major reasons for the shrinking middle class. (Thurow, 1987, pp.33-34)

Other key economic facts underlying the dwindling middle class are a halving of the rate of growth of the gross national product in 1979-1985 compared to 1960-1969 and a 3 fold decline in the increase of labor productivity in the same period.

Taken as a whole, statistics indicate a shrinkage of the middle class and a corresponding growth of the lower class. They also point to the conclusion that this trend is secular and deep rooted. Grappling with the changing structure of the U.S. economy and its place in the international economy is vital to unraveling the reasons for this change, and what the future may hold. The political implications of this shift need parallel study.

B. The Underclass

Originally coined as a popular and descriptive term, the concept of the underclass has caught on and is now widely considered to be a "functional," "accurate" term that sociologists and policy makers must use for "diagnosing" and "prescribing." (Nathan, p.2)

According to Richard Nathan (a professor at Princeton, a
formal official in the Nixon administration and a central figure in the forging of a liberal/conservative consensus on welfare policy, the underclass is a "distinctively urban" group that is "hardened and residual," extremely alienated and sunk heavily into criminal activity. Supposedly, the underclass is a product of the success, not the failure of American social policy: as new opportunities opened for the upwardly mobile minorities, those left behind were further isolated, not by racism which had largely disappeared, but by their own anti-social behavior. The underclass in fact refers only to Black and Hispanic poor in the largest cities. Nathan blames the "anti-social nature of the underclass" for the current conservative-retrenchment mood of the nation on social policy. (Nathan, p.4, 13. See also, Lemann)

Its proponents say that the new term is needed to describe a qualitatively new social phenomenon of the past two decades: the concentration of urban Black and Hispanic poor in "poverty areas" (defined as census tracts in which 20% or more of the people are in poverty). According to Nathan, 86.1% of the Black and Hispanic poor in the 100 largest cities' live in such poverty areas, compared to about 33.9% of white poor. Supposedly this justifies the racial specificity of the underclass.

The policy punchline of the concept of the underclass is the transformation of social welfare programs into workfare. Indeed, in the last year or so a remarkable consensus among liberals and conservatives on the need to pour up to an additional billion dollars a year into workfare programs has emerged. This liberal/conservative consensus can be seen in the common program adopted by the Governor's Conference, the 40 states which have already instituted work programs for welfare mothers, and by the 4 bipartisan workfare bills presently before Congress. The New York Times bluntly stated that this consensus for workfare "is enhanced because of the way the consensus was created--out of fear that the poor are becoming such a burden that they threaten to bring the rest of society down with them." (2/28/87) The goal of the policy, however, is not to do away with the underclass, but to control its size and behavior enough so that it does not infect the rest of society.

In my opinion the concept of the underclass should be rejected as unscientific, racially biased, and politically motivated. While the rise in the rate of poverty and the concentration of such poverty in the inner cities is an important social phenomenon that is reaching new proportions, the term underclass is unjustifiably racially targeted and lumps all minority poor together as lazy, welfare cheaters, drug abusers and/or criminals. The term obscures the crucial distinction between the poorest sections of the working class and those that have gone completely over to crime as a way of life, what Marxists call the lumpen proletariat. And it blames the poor and unemployed for their own condition, as if they were poor because they refuse to work. In these ways it obscures rather than clarifies the study of the poor and unemployed rather than illuminating it. Moreover,
its policy implications are unsavory: "At best workfare would provide opportunities for a handful of welfare recipients. At worst, it would introduce a new form of mass peonage." (Piven)

Nonetheless the considerable concern and energy devoted to the subject of the underclass by mainstream social scientists and policy makers is another sign of important changes underway in the socio-economic structure of U.S. society, and of the working class in particular. A study of unemployment, poverty, and their intersection with racism must certainly be a high priority for working class studies.

II. Marx, Engels and Lenin on Working Class Divisions

It is often asserted that the founders of Marxism-Leninism were dogmatically devoted to the notion that classes are the only important unit of social structure and that their ideological commitment to a revolutionary working class blinded them to intra-class divisions. While it is certainly true that classes and class struggle were their prime concern, they also paid considerable attention to intra-working class divisions.

In this section, I will briefly review the contours of Marx, Engels and Lenin's work on this subject.

A. Marx and Engels

First, I would like to comment on Marx and Engels widely misunderstood concept of the working class as a whole. Both the academe and the left itself tend to focus exclusively on Marx's analysis of the property relation, especially the exploitation of the workers at the point of production. Hence it is commonly argued, by friend and foe of Marxism alike, that Marx conceived of the working class as a homogenous bloc exploited by and in contradiction to capital.

Such a conception of Marxism is one-sided to the point of falsehood. First, Marx clearly understood that surplus value had not only to be produced, but also to be realized, and that this took the efforts of financial and commercial capitalists (and the exploitation of their workers) to accomplish, not just industrial capitalists and factory workers. Second, and particularly critical to the question of working class divisions, Marx and Engels acutely understood the centrality of competition within the working class to the reality of that class. As they put it in the Communist Manifesto: "the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on the competition between the labourers."

Put another way, the reality of the worker is not just the factory, but also the marketplace, which Marx and Engels understood to be every bit as important to understanding capitalism as the factory. While the crucial common condition of the entire working class is propertyless, a condition crystallized in their exploitation by capital in the factory, every individual worker
must also interact in the marketplace, both to sell his/her labor-
power and to purchase the necessities of life. And in this
marketplace, bitter contradictions break out: contradictions
between competing capitalists for profit as well as competition
among laborers for jobs, promotions, training, etc. In short, as
Marx and Engels stated, the fundamental property relations of
capitalism are played out and mediated through the laws of
generalized commodity production and exchange. In this realm, the
differences and contradictions among proletarians are not at all
insignificant. In fact, the motivating purpose of all working
class organization is precisely to eliminate, or at least to
suppress, competition among the workers in order that they might
unite as a class to face the employers. By contrast, it is one of
the fundamental necessities of capital to keep the workers
competing with each other, thus divided.

Competition among workers, mediated by capital itself, is
thus the theoretical framework within which Marxists grapple with
intra-workingclass economic divisions. Marx and Engels' own
efforts in this regard are instructive.

The main case presented to them by history involved the
preponderance of reformism in the English working class, then the
largest and most organized national proletariat in the world. Marx
bluntly stated that "the English labor leaders had sold
themselves," a pronouncement that hardly endeared him to the
powerful English labor movement. (Quoted in Lenin, Vol.23, p. 112)

Marx and Engels saw this opportunism arising from the
exceptional monopoly position of English capital in the world
economy. This monopoly position also improved the condition of the
English workers.

The truth is this: during the period of England’s industrial
monopoly the English working-class have, to a certain
extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These
benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them; the
privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass
had, at least, a temporary share now and then....only a
small, privileged, 'protected' minority permanently
benefited. (Engels, p.37)

Who then constituted this "privileged" and "protected"
minority of workers? Engels identified two sections of the working
class that constituted this sector: the factory hands (primarily
located in the textile mills and iron foundries of the north) and
members of the "great Trades' Unions" (headquartered in London).
Together, these two sectors:

form an aristocracy among the working class; they have
succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively
comfortable position, and they accept it as final. They are
the very model working men of Messrs. Leone Levi & Giffen,
and they are very nice people indeed nowadays to deal with, for any sensible capitalist in particular and for the whole capitalist class in general. (Engels, p. 35)

Marx and Engels were also fully aware of the national chauvinism which was also bred by England’s monopoly position, especially its colonization of Ireland:

Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. (Marx in Ireland and the Irish Question, p. 293 cited in Weiss, p. 30)

Thus Marx and Engels were by no means blind to the divisions and backwardness of certain working classes or sectors of working classes. To the contrary, they constructed the key theoretical foundation for understanding such divisions: competition in the working class, as structured and conditioned by capital accumulation, monopoly, and national oppression. However, Marx and Engels thought the monopoly enjoyed by English capital was strictly temporary, in fact quickly eroding. They crisis of 1876 led them to (erroneously) predict the early resurrection of the socialist movement on the basis of the "hitherto stagnant lowest strata." They did not have the historical basis to fully grasp the emergence of monopoly capitalism and national oppression which would make monopoly profits a generalized feature of capitalist economic life. This task, and the drawing out of its implications, was left to their successors.

B. Lenin’s Theories of the Labor Aristocracy and National Divisions

By the early 1900s a contradictory development had taken place in the European working class movement. While mass Marxist parties had come into being in most of the European countries, they soon became dominated by "opportunism" (defined by Lenin as "sacrificing the fundamental interests of the masses to the temporary interests of an insignificant minority of the workers or, in other words, an alliance between a section of the workers and the bourgeoisie, directed against the mass of the proletariat.") (Lenin, LCW, Vol. 21, p. 242) The spectacle of "patriotic" mass workers' parties collaborating with their own bourgeoisie in the slaughter of WWI represented, in Lenin's eyes, a qualitative political degeneration. Lenin thereafter sought a political regroupment of the revolutionary Marxists outside the Second International. More germane for the present study, this degeneration, as well as the prospects for reforging a revolutionary workers' trend, required a materialist theoretical explanation.
This theoretical task preoccupied Lenin from the outbreak of WWI to the Russian Revolution in 1917. Lenin undertook to define the precise character of opportunism, its connection with imperialism, its social roots in the labor aristocracy, and the social basis in the lower strata of class for reconstructing the working class movement on a revolutionary basis.

From Marx and Engels’ descriptions and analysis of the rise of opportunism in England, Lenin abstracted out the central theoretical point:

...why does England’s monopoly explain the (temporary) victory of opportunism in England? Because monopoly yields superprofits, i.e. a surplus of profits over and above the capitalist profits that are normal and customary all over the world. The capitalists can devote a part (and not a small one, at that!) of these superprofits to bribe their own workers, to create something like an alliance...between the workers of the given nation and their capitalists against all other countries. (Lenin, LCW, Vol.23, p.114)

Based on this abstraction, Lenin extended the analysis well beyond England, to apply to all of the imperialist countries:

The last third of the nineteenth century saw the transition to the new, imperialist era. Finance capital not of one, but of several, though very few, Great Powers enjoys a monopoly...It was possible in those days [when England alone held a monopoly position] to bribe and corrupt the working class of one country for decades....But on the other hand, every imperialist ‘Great’ Power can and does bribe smaller strata (than in England in 1848-68) of the ‘labour aristocracy’....Now a ‘bourgeois labor party,’ to use Engels’ remarkable profound expression, could arise only in one country, because it alone enjoyed a monopoly....Now a ‘bourgeois labor party’ is inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries.... (LCW, Vol. 23, pp.115-116)

The main elements of Lenin’s theory of the labor aristocracy are: First, the advent of monopolies as the dominant form of capital in the era of imperialism produces unprecedented superprofits for all of monopoly capital, pumped out of the colonies and neo-colonies as well as out of the working people of the imperialist countries. "Just as among individual capitalists super-profits go to the one whose machinery is superior to the average or who owns certain monopolies, Lenin wrote, "so among nations the one that is economically better off than the others gets super-profits."

Second, a portion of those superprofits is utilized to bribe a sector of the working class, to win them to the side of the imperialists in a joint quest for superprofits. "It is these thousands of millions in superprofits that form the economic basis of opportunism in the working class movement." (By "bribery," Lenin did not refer to simple-minded personal corruption, nor did he mean that those bribed never did battle with their employers.
Rather, the Leninist sense of the term captures an *objective social relation* between a section of the working class and the monopolists, regardless of the motivation or militancy of the particular workers involved.

The privileges (1) allowed these workers constitute a complex system, including higher and rising wages, unusual job stability, improved working conditions, an expanded social wage, access to educational and cultural institutions, a place in the political system, etc. Such a privileged labor aristocracy in turn serves as the main social basis for an opportunist trend in the working class, replete with bourgeois reformist illusions and national chauvinism.

The receipt of high monopoly profits by the capitalists in one of the numerous branches of industry, in one of the numerous countries, etc., makes it economically possible for them to bribe certain sections of the workers, for a time a fairly considerable minority of them, and win them to the side of the bourgeoisie of a given industry or given nation against others. (LCW, Vol.22, p.301)

Lenin generally used the term "labor aristocracy" interchangeably with the "upper strata" of the class in the imperialist countries. One implication of Lenin's view is that it would be incorrect to narrowly conceive of the labor aristocracy as simply skilled workers or labor bureaucrats. These are often a part of the labor aristocracy, but this privileged strata may include other sectors of the class as well. The size and composition of the privileged strata should be expected to change according to concrete historical circumstances, especially the fortunes of a given country's capitalists in the world market and the historically developed characteristics of each country.

Third, the working class of imperialist countries can therefore be expected to be split between privileged upper strata

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1. The concept of "privilege" became central to Lenin's political and economic analyses. In general the term is used to refer to a social relation (privileged v. disprivileged) within a given class of a country (e.g. privileged upper strata v. disprivileged or unprivileged lower strata of the working class), between the same class in two different countries (e.g. monopoly privileges of the English bourgeoisie over other national bourgeoisies in the world capitalist system) or between nations and nationalities (English v. Irish). The idea of the privileges of the labor aristocracy and of national privileges enjoyed by the people of oppressor countries is ubiquitous in Lenin's writings. In general, then, privilege is a socio-economic relationship that is used to discuss various non-class social relationships. Naturally, the term may also be used to discuss the benefits of a privileged position—i.e., "privileges." I believe the further development of this concept to be key not only to understanding the stratification of the working class, but to other relationships such as racism and sexism.
and the basic mass of the proletariat.

"...in the epoch of imperialism, owing to objective causes, the proletariat has been split into two international camps, one of which has been corrupted by the crumbs that fall from the table of the dominant-nation bourgeoisie..." (Vol. 22, p. 343)

As against other sectors of the international working class, the labor aristocracy allies with the capitalists in their quest for superprofits in hopes of retaining their own privileged position. As against the mass of the proletariat at home, the labor aristocracy fights to maintain its privileged access to stable and high paying jobs, as well as social, political and cultural privileges.

The political punchline of this analysis, then, is that the socialist movement in the imperialist countries must be based among the lower strata of the proletariat and must actually fight against the representatives of the labor aristocracy for influence among the working masses.

However, Lenin was not blind to backward influences among the non-privileged mass of the working class of the advanced capitalist countries. He realized that some of the middle strata of the working class also realized certain national privileges by dint of living in an imperialist country. The extent of such privileges varies country to country and from period to period, but in general the imperialist countries provide considerably better living and working conditions for the working class than do the colonies and neo-colonies.

Lenin’s theory of the labor aristocracy primarily deals with divisions internal to the working class of the imperialist countries, based on imperialist bribery and privilege. By contrast, his theory of national oppression under imperialism whereby the advanced capitalist countries systematically exploit the less developed countries yields national privileges to all the inhabitants (to very different degrees according to class and strata) of the oppressor countries. Such national privilege, most vivid in the distinction in living standard and political liberties between imperialist and underdeveloped countries, is not at all restricted to the labor aristocracy, but is also enjoyed by broad sectors of the working class that manage to achieve considerable economic and social stability compared to their class counterparts abroad.

In a nutshell, these two theories, that of the labor aristocracy and that of national oppression/privilege, constitute Lenin’s main contributions to the understanding of the stratification and division of the working class, and their accompanying political significance.

C. Initial Application of Lenin’s Theories to Post WWII U.S.
From the late 19th century to WWII, there was a readily discernible and significant socialist or leftwing trend within the U.S. labor movement (e.g. the IDW, the Socialist Party and the CIO). True to Lenin's theory, this movement was largely based in the lower strata of the proletariat. The CIO, for example, was based among unorganized, low paid and highly exploited industrial workers.

However, after WWII, a number of key changes undermined and largely eliminated a mass leftwing working class trend. First, the U.S. became the overwhelmingly dominant economic and political power in the capitalist world, tremendously increasing the profits of U.S. monopolies. In 1948, U.S. industrial production amounted to 54.6% of the total industrial output in the capitalist world, more than the rest of the capitalist world combined! At the same time, its domestic raw material and gold reserves were unequalled, its international holdings dominated the rest of the world, including Western Europe, and U.S. banks replaced England's as the main source of capital. The U.S. share in world capital exports skyrocketed from 6.3% in 1914 to 35.3% in 1930 to 59.1% in 1960. (Elbaum, #12, pp.93-96) In addition, the U.S. enjoyed overwhelming military superiority, including its nuclear monopoly.

Second, based on these tremendous monopoly profits, the U.S. capitalists set out to buy off extended sectors of the U.S. working class. It particularly set its sights on defusing the mass progressive labor movement based in the very heart of U.S. industry. Its strategy was two-fold: (1) to gain the allegiance of the conservative sectors of labor, including those within the CIO, to rout the left from its strategic positioning in the labor movement and (2) to include significant sectors of industrial workers, formerly the base of the left, in an expanded labor aristocracy. A combination of vicious red-baiting and large scale bribery largely succeeded in achieving these aims. The crowning glories included the enactment of reactionary labor legislation (especially Taft-Hartley), the expulsion of left-led unions from the CIO and the isolation of progressives within the CIO, the near universal adoption of anti-communist clauses in the unions, and the eventual merger of the AFL and CIO on a pro-imperialist basis. In this way, important sectors of unionized industrial workers in the monopoly industries were incorporated into the privileged, upper strata of the working class along with the more traditional bulwark of the labor aristocracy, the skilled workers.

Third, another expansion of the labor aristocracy has taken place through the tremendous expansion of professional, managerial and technical jobs, many of which have become proletarianized. However, the bulk of this new and growing sector of the working class still hold many privileges over the mass of workers and have been largely incorporated into the labor aristocracy, although quite a distinct sector with its own unique social, political and ideological characteristics.

Fourth, the overwhelming international position of U.S. capital produced benefits for all but the lowest strata of the U.S. working class. For example, as late as 1970 German workers in
manufacturing received only 53.5% of the wages of their U.S. counterparts, Japanese workers 34.3% and French workers 29%. (Wages of workers in the underdeveloped countries were qualitatively lower still.) Also, average real weekly take-home pay for U.S. production workers increased by 42% from 1946-1969. (Elbaum, p.94) In short, the national privileges of U.S. workers were substantial, thus contributing to political backwardness among the middle layers of U.S. workers and not just the labor aristocracy. Together, the much expanded labor aristocracy and the effects of imperialist prosperity on the middle strata of the working class led mainstream social scientists to merrily proclaim a vast new middle class and the end of poverty. (Blumberg, Chapter 1)

Fifth, capital recruited masses of black former sharecroppers from the U.S. South to fill many of the low pay, unstable, and dangerous jobs, as well as to disproportionately serve as the crucial on-call unemployed workers for capital. Due to racism, the capitalists and labor opportunists largely succeeded in isolating this sector of the proletariat, attributing its oppressed condition to Black inferiority as opposed to a condition imposed by capital and disadvantageous for the entire working class.

This structural change of incorporating Blacks heavily into the lower strata of the urban working class became the key material basis for the reproduction of racism under qualitatively changed social conditions. Racism was transformed from a largely Southern and rural social relationship to one based in the heart of the urban proletariat on a nationwide scale. Racial privilege for white workers took the new form of near exclusive access to the labor aristocracy and overwhelming domination of the stable and increasingly comfortable middle layers of the working class who now became incorporated into a vastly expanded middle class. Racial oppression took the new form of consignment to the lowest strata of the working class entrapped in urban ghettos. (See Reich and Burnham)

Given these key developments, it is little wonder that opportunism has gripped the U.S. trade union movement since WWII and that the closest thing to a progressive working class based movement since that time has been spurred by the motion of the Black community. While this analysis cries out for more research, I consider it an initial verification of the usefulness of Lenin’s theory of the labor aristocracy, his theory of national privilege, and its potential fit with a Marxist theory of U.S.
III. Contemporary Marxist Analyses of Working Class Divisions

Unfortunately, contemporary Marxists have generally failed to follow up on the work of Marx, Engels and Lenin. In fact, one rarely finds reference to Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy, and many think that it no longer applies. Yet, given the obvious lack of a progressive working class movement in this country and the often backward politics of the AFL-CIO, interest in studies of the working class and its composition among Marxists has risen dramatically in the last two decades. This has been especially true since the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974.

Braverman made an important contribution to a Marxist analysis of the changing composition of the working class, especially the tremendous growth of service and clerical workers to it. Contrary to the fashion of the time he wrote, Braverman showed that Marx understood production and the working class to consist of much more than the activity of industrial workers in the factory. This had the important implication that the working class was growing, and not shrinking as so many non-Marxist and New Left theorists asserted. He also made an excellent analysis of the growth of the reserve army of labor and, in general, updated and defended Marx's general law of capitalist accumulation; i.e. that the greater the energy and extent of capital, the greater the misery and poverty of labor. However, Braverman did not deal specifically with the issue of stratification of the working class and his work will not be treated in detail here.

A. Poulantzas and Wright in Brief

In the mid and late 1970s the work of Louis Althusser and his students, especially Nicos Poulantzas, came into much vogue among academic Marxists. However, Poulantzas, whose popularity was built largely on his studies of the state, made a travesty of the Marxist analysis of the working class. In his massive *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, he posed a severely narrow conception of the working class: only those who actually produce surplus value ("productive workers") through manual labor qualify. In direct contradistinction to Marx, secretaries, retail salespersons, janitors, teachers, engineers, clerks, public workers, foremen, etc. were explicitly excluded from the ranks working class by Poulantzas, and David Ricardo's notion that unproductive and/or mental laborers were parasitic upon the manual workers at the point of production was resurrected. To make matters worse, Poulantzas also added the criteria of class consciousness to his definition of the working class; lack of such consciousness also excluded one from the working class, regardless of one's objective position or role in society. (Poulantzas, 1975)

As Parkin observed (pp.18-27), Poulantzas thus incorporated non-Marxist notions into a supposedly Marxist analysis of the working class. The distinction between manual and non-manual workers (or blue collar v. white collar) and the issue of subjective consciousness (e.g. status) are perhaps the two most common understandings of class within mainstream sociology.
Erik Olin Wright also largely departs from classical Marxist analysis. His main error is that of making relations of domination, authority and control central to the contradiction between capital and labor, a la Raif Dahlendorf. He has recently criticized his own earlier work for defining class relations "almost exclusively on relations of domination rather than exploitation....This would lead class analysis firmly in the direction of Dahlendorf's analysis of classes as positions within authority relations." (Wright, p.56, 57)

However, his new formulation retains control as central to the concept of class: in place of the control over labor, he now sees the key as "control over the productive forces and the exploitation which such control generates." (p.97) Instead of being important in its own right, Wright now sees control as "property relations broadly conceived." (p.97) In addition, he recast his former concept of control over labor power into the view that credentials are a form of property (thus taking a page out of Parkin), and therefore still central to defining class relations.

The substitution of control for property relations, in fact, is probably the most common mistake of U.S. neo-Marxist analyses. In the last decade, a veritable deluge of theories and empirical/historical analyses have appeared promoting this point of view. Perhaps the most influential and important as regards the stratification of the working class is the theory of labor market segmentation, to which we now turn.

B. Labor Market Segmentation

Here we will review only the Marxist version of labor market segmentation theory, as elaborated by David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich (G, E, and R) in Segmented Work, Divided Workers. (See Southworth for a tracing of the 10 year evolution of their theory.) I shall reconstruct the main theses and try to draw out the strengths and weaknesses of the theory, primarily as it relates to stratification of the working class.

The central concept of the theory in its present version is the class struggle over control of the labor process. For G, E and R the concept of labor control (or management) determines no less than the actual history and successive stages of capitalist development; the present day segmentation of the labor market and the contours of class struggle throughout U.S. history.

The justification for this emphasis on control rests with the authors' conception of capitalist production and class struggle. The basic notion is that workers sell their labor power-their ability to work—and in order to receive payment must show up to work. But how much they actually do work, and therefore the amount of value realized by the capitalist (profit or loss, or, more exactly, the amount of profit) is determined by how successful the capitalists are in controlling the pace, quantity and effectiveness of their work. Thus, in this theory control is the
focal point of capitalist production and of class struggle under capitalism.

The historical development of different forms of such capitalist control, as manifested in different institutional structures (called "social structures of accumulation"), define the main stages of capitalist development. Each of the three stages—"initial proletarianization" (1820s-1890s), "homogenization" (1890s-1940s), and "labor market segmentation" (1940s to present)—goes through a life cycle of exploration, consolidation and decay.

Briefly, the stage of "initial proletarianization" is marked by an incomplete transformation of the labor process by capital and diverse forms of personal labor control directly by the owner of the firm. "Homogenization" is defined by the emergence of the drive system of labor control. The drive system involved mechanization but above all the extensive use of foremen as opposed to skilled labor to direct the labor process.

The present stage, that of "Labor Market Segmentation," is founded on the development of the system of "structural control," in which bureaucratic rules and high technology largely replace foremen as the centerpiece of labor control. However, the drive system still persists in peripheral firms.

According to the authors, structural control is a combination of two distinct methods, technical control and bureaucratic control. The first is the purposeful design of (post WWII) machinery and the labor process (by engineers, et al.—"scientific management") to control the pacing and sequence of their work. These decisions are now built into the technology and confront the worker not as the oppressive whip of a hated foreman, but as something normal and natural, built into the job itself.

By contrast, "bureaucratic control" refers to "improving the structured design and management of job systems and rules to ensure the greatest possible worker compliance and productivity." (p.187) Such rules were generated by new management bodies such as personnel departments, industrial relations departments, etc., and were vast in character.

In general, structural control is practiced by large "core" corporations as the costs of such methods require big capital, high profits and stability, whereas the continuation of the drive system is most frequent among smaller, low profit and less stable "peripheral" firms. However, there is no one to one relationship between monopoly corporations and structural control, or competitive capitalist firms and the drive system. Therefore the authors dropped their earlier formulation that the determining feature of segmented labor markets was the monopoly v. competitive distinction, and instead linked the different labor segments to forms of control, regardless of the type of firm practicing it. (p.200)

Consistent with the overall theory, the different forms of control are the basis of the division of the working class into
qualitatively distinct segments, each with its own distinct characteristics with regard to work experience, class consciousness, and organization. Those jobs regulated by structural control constitute the primary labor market and those under the drive system comprise the secondary labor market. Primary labor market jobs command higher pay, provide greater job security, and provide more opportunities for advancement than do jobs in the secondary labor market.

However, the primary segment is also said to be divided between independent primary jobs and subordinate primary jobs based on different rules governing job performance, the mechanisms of acquiring skills, and the labor market mechanism for allocation of jobs. Independent primary jobs include many professional, managerial and technical jobs. They are governed by professional standards and employees have significant work autonomy. Such workers tend to acquire general skills through formal education and to apply those general rules and capacities to variable individual situations they encounter at work. (p. 202)

Subordinate primary jobs are governed by definite rules, work is routinized and repetitious, supervision is close, and skills are learned on the job. This labor segment is largely composed of semi-skilled blue and white collar workers. (p. 203)

These, then, are the three "qualitatively distinct" labor market segments: independent primary, subordinate primary, and secondary. In fact, the authors consider that these segments represent distinct "relations of production." (p. 213) From 1950 to 1970 the size of these segments has been relative stable at about 1/3 of the workforce each.

The authors go on to assert that this capitalist-imposed division also determines the political consciousness of each "class fraction." The independent primary sector is said to be focused on the quality of life (e.g. the environment), individual autonomy (e.g. personal and civil rights) and freedom from political and social oppression. The subordinate primary sector is characterized as most interested in economic growth, U.S. international dominance, full employment, and the integrity of New Deal institutions. Finally, the subordinate workers are supposedly mainly concerned about access to government services and income supports.

Their general conclusion is that:

We would argue that labor segmentation retarded the movement toward an increasingly class-conscious working class, with its own political presence, and that it helped create the splintered set of political forces, based on class fractions, that have dominated U.S. politics since the 1940s....In so doing, segmentation dramatically weakened the working class as a whole.

D. Critique of the Theory of Labor Market Segmentation
This theory represents a radical departure from Marxism, yet makes some contributions to our understanding of working class stratification.

First, as opposed to Marxism, the theory is subjectivist and not materialist. It posits capitalists' attempts to control labor as the driving force of capitalist production, completely ignoring the laws of capitalist production identified Marx: the law of value, surplus value, capitalist accumulation, etc. Thus, the history of capitalism is seen as a sophisticated plot by capitalists to devise means to control their workers and hence derive a profit. Even the development of technology is reduced to a capitalist scheme to rob the workers of control over the labor process. While Marx and Lenin understood stages in the development of capitalism to be defined by stages in the development of capital (from primitive accumulation to competitive to monopoly) determined by the laws of surplus value, the concentration and centralization of capital, etc., G, E and R see it as a succession of capitalist control schemes to quell and exploit the workers. This is backsliding into subjectivism. (Southworth, p.8-12)

Second, the logic of why particular means of control determine labor segments is unconvincing (and largely asserted rather than explained). At best, the degree of control different workers have over the labor process is one of numerous factors determining their level of wages and job stability. And such control is a factor only insofar as it can be translated into a favorable bargaining position vis-a-vis the capitalists. Consequently, I see much more explanatory power in Lenin's point that wage and working condition distinctions are more related to the market position of the firm (especially monopoly v. competitive) and the market position of different sectors of workers (e.g., the market position of skilled workers, professionals or technicians as against unskilled workers, the advantages of large, strategically placed trade unions over the unorganized or weak unions, the vulnerable position of immigrant workers, etc.) than to the methods of labor control employed by capitalists on the job. For example, skilled workers usually get paid more than unskilled workers, regardless of whether they are in the secondary labor market or the primary labor market. The same holds true for organized workers over unorganized, white over non-white, men over women, etc. (Form, p.133-34) More generally, by focusing on forms of capitalist control rather than monopoly profits and the privileges offered to different sectors of workers based on them, the theory only glancingly touches upon the dynamics of the labor market, including the capitalists' role in it.

Moreover, this theory cannot explain pre-WWII divisions in the working class because labor segmentation is considered basically a post-WWII phenomenon. However, divisions in the working class were pronounced and antagonistic prior to WWII, e.g. AFL v. CIO, the IWW and the Socialists; immigrant v. non-immigrant, etc.

Third, the theory one-sidedly attributes working class division to the capitalists. Of course, the positive side of this
is that some of the very real attempts by capitalists to control and divide workers are subjected to exposure. However, even these attempts are examined in distorted fashion, because the issue of competition and contradictions among workers, even as mediated by the capitalists, is omitted.

Fourth, the issues of imperialism, sexism, and racism are virtually untouched. Privileges arising out of living in the world's most powerful imperialist country are at best an external factor that may partially account for some of the money available to "core" corporations that enable them to institute structural control schemes. Racism and sexism are empirically fitted into the labor segmentation scheme after WWII, but neither are elaborated as distinct social relations that divide the working class independently of the labor segmentation analysis. (Slavery, sharecropping and segregation do not figure in their over 200 page history of U.S. capitalism!) And the authors chose to ignore the very distinct levels of political and class consciousness between minority and white workers regardless of labor segment, thus rendering the political explanatory power of their theory incomplete or even suspect.

Fifth, this theory narrows the concept of class struggle to a (relatively) petty struggle over the pacing and organization of work: the struggle to end private property and exploitation is outside of its purview. For that matter, only struggles to reform the workplace in favor of more control to workers is not comprehended by the theory. Community, anti-racist and other struggles lie outside its domain.

The labor segmentation theory also mechanically sees the unity of the class as hopelessly and permanently sundered by capitalist control schemes. Labor segmentation and class fractional political division are apparently inevitable so long as the capitalists apply different control schemes to different workers.

In general, the theory of labor segmentation bears the clear imprint of the outlook of the skilled and especially educated workers (so-called independent primary). Control over the labor process is simply not in the cards for most workers so long as capitalism persists (and perhaps for a time after that). Focusing on such control, and placing it central to the "class struggle," is primarily a privilege of professionals, managers and technicians. Put in their own terms, the authors' focus on control represents an example of the exaggerated emphasis of the independent primary workers on issues of individual autonomy and freedom.

However, I do think that there is much to be learned from the theory, if recast in Lenin's framework. First and most important, the theory's discussion of structured internal labor markets, the system of credentials, and the like can be seen as some of the many ways that the capitalist's intervene in the labor market, creating privileged and non-privileged sectors of it and widening their control over it. The further study of capitalist intervention into the labor market will be greatly helped by this
work.

Second, different forms of control over labor are a crucial part of workers' working conditions and class struggle does in fact break out over it. Such forms of control can also be seen as structuring privileged and non-privileged working conditions for different sectors of workers. For both reasons, grappling with capitalist labor-management is an important task for Marxists, and these authors have contributed much in this field.

Third, the development of this theory has led the authors to conduct some useful empirical studies into the condition of the U.S. working class in different historical periods, especially since WWII. This data will be useful for future studies of the divisions in the working class.

Finally, the authors' general assertion that "the disunity of the U.S. working class persists in large part as a result of objective divisions among workers" (p.8) is extremely well taken and a positive counter to those Marxists who refuse to suggest that the working class is anything less than a homogeneous revolutionary force. That their own attempt to analyze these objective divisions is faulty should not discredit the theoretical challenge they have confronted.

IV. WILLIAM FORM: A CONTEMPORARY WEBERIAN ANALYSIS

The most comprehensive and insightful contemporary analysis of the stratification of the U.S. working class that I am presently aware of is William Form's recent Divided We Stand: Working-Class Stratification in America. This work illuminates numerous issues and is largely made up of solid empirical studies of the political and economic realities and behavior of different strata of U.S. workers. Here we can only examine its theoretical highlights.

Form's aim is avowedly political: "The purpose of undertaking class analysis, after all, is to ascertain whether economic and status distinctions have political consequences." (p.161) His working-class partisanship, as well as his scholarship, also leads him to dispute the common view that "the major societal cleavage to be that between the working class and the middle class." In his view, "This overriding concern about the manual- and white-collar split diverted attention from the persistent cleavages among manual workers." (p.85)

A. Theoretical Approach

Form's method is sociological, specifically Weberian sociology. This orientation is the basis both of his conceptualization of the working class and the strata within it. As regards the working class:

...I indicated that I was inclined to take a Weberian approach to class definition. That approach stresses
occupational mobility within and between generations as crucial in the class designation of occupations. Pools of occupations wherein mobility is easy and typical within and between generations tend to define class boundaries. (p. 53)

Herein lies one of the shortcomings of the analysis, as this Weberian approach, combined with his own empirical bias, leads Form to what he admits to be a "conservative" (or what Parkin called "minimalist") view of the working class.

For this research, the working class is composed of all workers in all non-farm manual and service jobs that are listed in the U.S. census. Farm laborers and tenants are excluded because their earnings are difficult to estimate and because they interact little with other manual and service employees. Although most office and sales clerks resemble manual workers economically, I decided to omit them from this study because two-fifths are secondary workers in families whose other earners include owners, managers, and professionals. Further, chief earners in blue- and white-collar families do not exhibit common patterns of generational mobility, a typical feature of social class membership. (p. 27)

Form thus opts for a "blue collar" conception of the working class, which, he says, constitutes about 50% of the total labor force. In my view this is a critical theoretical error that hampers his overall analysis by excluding key sectors of the class from his stratification scheme, especially clerical and retail workers and the lower sectors of professional, technical and administrative workers. (It does, however, facilitate Form's empirical research.)

His Weberian approach is more cogent (and more consistent with Marxism) as regards stratification of the working class. Wisely, he anchors this analysis in two key factors: above all, earnings, and also, politics. "I start with the assumption that any division in the working class must first be based on consistent earnings differences." (p. 25) "The size of income differentials becomes politically important when it is large enough to be worth fighting for and when it inhibits class solidarity." (p. 97) He then uses his Weberian tools to construct the following theoretical approach:

Weber emphasizes that differences in the social and economic organization of labor market affect workers' life chances, property, earnings, and employment. Markets vary in the organizational strength of their industries, and the social status of their workers. The intersections or matchings of the occupational, industrial, and status dimensions of markets should point to divisions of the working class along economic lines. (p. 28)

In this framework, "the organizational strength of occupations is reflected in their work autonomy, social cohesion, and extent of unionization." Property, skill and unionization are the keys in this regard. Unlike recent labor segmentation theory, Form
understands the economic strength of industries (and their markets) as bifurcated, a la Lenin, between "core" companies that are "large, capital intensive and profitable because they tend to operate in oligopolistic markets while industries in the periphery are typically smaller, labor intensive, and less profitable because they operate in competitive markets." (p.29) And the "status dimension" primarily refers to "ascriptive" characteristics, mainly race and sex.

Hence, what divides workers is:

...whether or not they exercise work autonomy on the basis of their property (self-employed vs. employee) or skill; whether or not they achieve social cohesion through their occupational socialization (crafts) and/or unionization; whether or not they find employment in economically strong sectors (core or periphery); and whether or not their ascribed statuses are favorably rewarded in society. (p.30)

Using a Weberian market- and status- oriented frame of reference, Form has, for the most part, captured the centrality for working class stratification analysis of monopoly v. competitive capital and competition in the class (employed v. unemployed, skilled v. unskilled, race, sex, union v. non-union, etc.). On the other hand, he has missed altogether the effect of living in the world's most powerful capitalist country (i.e., national privilege) and downplays the racial division, primarily by default. Rather than analyzing the quality of the social relations of racism, he simply takes it for granted as an "ascriptive" status characteristic to be quantified. (The notion of "ascriptive characteristics," in general, reduces historically produced social relations, such as racism and sexism, to the inherent natural characteristics of people, thereby obscuring rather than clarifying reality.)

B. 5 Working Class Strata

Based on this theoretical approach, Form sees a hierarchy of 5 main strata within the U.S. (manual) working class: (1) the self-employed, (2) skilled or craft employees, (3) "nonskilled" (meaning both semiskilled and unskilled) employees in the core sector of the economy, (4) nonskilled employees in the peripheral economic sector, and (5) the marginally employed, defined as those who work fewer than 27 weeks per year. Later he tentatively adds foremen as a possible sixth category, between the self-employed and skilled employees in the hierarchy.

Form argues that:

The biggest division in the class is between the upper three and the lower two strata. The self-employed and skilled are quite alike, and they have nascent social-class characteristics. The skilled and core workers are more alike economically than in social status, while core and periphery workers are quite distinct along both dimensions. The marginally employed are insufficiently differentiated in this analysis, but maintaining their separate identity is
However, the author sometimes shifts his line, and argues that the nonskilled core workers stand in the middle, between the "labor aristocracy" (the upper two strata, plus foreman) and the "disprivileged" workers (the lower two strata). Such an understanding exemplifies Form's "idea that the most important social, economic, and political split in the working class is that between the skilled and nonskilled." In this formulation, the privileged upper strata, or labor aristocracy, constitutes 30% of the class (5% self-employed, 5% foremen, and 20% skilled craft workers).

Form's analysis of the role of unions in this stratal analysis is a positive break with the tendency either to uncritically extol or blindly condemn them on ideological grounds. Clearly, Form is pro-union; in fact, he considers unions to be the key to building a working class political as well as economic movement. However, this does not blind him to their heterogeneity or to their objectively contradictory role at present.

He points out the undue influence of skilled workers in the trade union movement, and the selfish use of unions by those skilled workers to protect their privileges. The trade union movement thus promotes "a union and consumer program, not a class program." (p. 109) As regards stratification, he proves that inequality is less pronounced within unions than among the unorganized. Further,

The economic advantages of union membership in the working class are so pervasive that the unionized may well be considered a privileged stratum. Union members have higher skills that other workers, are employed in industries that pay higher wages and offer greater fringe benefits, suffer less unemployment, and occupy more favored ascriptive positions in society. (pp.133-34)

However only a minority of manual workers are union members. And, "while unions advance the earnings of already privileged workers, other employees are left more exposed to economic vicissitudes" due to union inattention to the disprivileged. (p.133) Thus "unions probably increase economic inequality in the working class."

Finally, through regression analyses he shows that "ascriptive characteristics" and "human capital" are rewarded more in the organized core than in the periphery. "Unions appear to have neglected workers in the periphery who are the most receptive to political mobilization [females and minorities] and unions have probably aggravated the sense of economic grievance among their women and black members." (p.187)

Although there is little space to detail Forms' political analyses, which take up 3 full chapters, his socio-economic distinction of strata is verified by distinctive stratal political and ideological consciousness and behavior. He finds the manual working class to be clearly distinct from other classes in economic
ideology, but not necessarily in politics. He argues that if manual workers were overwhelmingly Democratic, the very face of U.S. politics would be changed.

However, this is not the case. Although he believes the CIO showed early promise of developing a distinct working class politics (as a decisive force in the Democratic Party), by 1965 the commitment of unions to the Democratic Party and to liberalism became "unglued" and political diversity within the working class proliferated. He attributes this problem primarily to the conservative influence and weight of the upper strata, but also notes the low political participation and tendency to party vacillation (i.e., swings from election to election) by the nonskilled. Through stratal analysis of political behavior and ideology Form reports that the higher the strata of the working class, the more conservative, the more politically active, consistent and organized, the more independent of the Democratic Party (to the right, not the left), the more apt to split tickets in voting and the less concerned with economic or social justice. In short, he believes his analysis of economic cleavages tend to correspond to political differences.

I find Form's definition of working class strata considerably more adequate than most contending conceptualizations. First, as against the long sociological tradition of defining the strata as skilled, semiskilled and unskilled I agree with combining the semiskilled and unskilled, as the distinction between the two has little economic or social importance. Second, as against the neo-Marxist labor segmentation theory scheme of independent primary, subordinate primary and secondary, I agree that the marginally employed and the skilled craft workers must be delineated as distinct strata. Third, although it runs against existing Marxist grain, I believe the inclusion of self-employed manual workers in the working class has merit. The fact that 1/3 of all manual workers have been self-employed at one time or another and that 2/3 have thought about attempting to make it on their own are evidence that these self-employed are closely tied to skilled workers, or should actually be considered a sector of them. Form's social, economic and political studies of this sector bear out his analysis. (See especially chapter 4.) His notion that foremen might also be included is also worthy of further study. (See especially chapter 3).

Also superior to many contending views is Form's recognition of the dialectical connection between the strata, especially between the privileged upper strata and the disprivileged lower strata. The strata are viewed in relationship to each other, with the upper strata actively protecting their privileges against the lower, as opposed to, for example, Gordon, Edwards, and Reich's view of strata existing side by side in no particular hierarchy or antagonism. For example, "the two higher strata want to preserve their skill and autonomy and thus do not trust other workers who threaten their monopoly." Indeed, Chapter 5 is entitled, "The Skilled: A Stratum for Itself."
C. Initial Reformulation

However, I would argue for a few important modifications. Theoretically, I believe Form's use of status categories undermines his emphasis on labor market competition and earnings as the key criteria for apprehending working class divisions. I therefore attempt an initial reformulation that keeps the focus on competition in the working class. Such a focus would give rise to a somewhat different categorization of strata.

First, Form's use of status categories (and the idea of "ascriptive characteristics") leads him to downplay race, nationality and sex as distinctive social relations, as already noted. Since minorities may be found in all strata of the class (though obviously disproportionately in its lower layers), an analysis of the quantitative economic impact of racism cannot comprehend its importance for class divisions. Instead, this task requires an analysis of the quality of the system of social relations of racism in U.S. society (i.e. society, culture and politics historically). From there its enormous political and socio-economic importance for the competition in the working class movement can be fathomed: both its crucial role in uniting whites across stratal (and class) lines around backward politics and practices and its role in producing relatively progressive politics among minorities, also across stratal lines.

Form's use of status categories also leads him to unnecessarily limit his understanding of the role of unions in his analysis. This is the source of his vacillation on whether the fundamental split in the class is between the upper 3 strata and the lower 2, or the upper 2 against the lower 2 with the nonskilled core workers in the middle. Recall that he divided the nonskilled core workers from the skilled upper strata solely on the basis of their lower status, even though their earnings were more or less comparable. Form's own studies testify to the critical importance of labor unions to the labor market position and earnings of different workers, and should be more forthrightly factored into stratal definitions. I attempt this below.

Finally, let me reiterate that status was one of the factors leading Form to exclude all white collar workers from the working class. The exclusion of the lower sectors of professional, technical, and administrative personnel, and of clerical and retail workers incorrectly omits them from Form's theory of working class stratification.

For these reasons, I believe Form's theory should be reformulated to make unambiguous the centrality of competition in the working class (labor market divisions, earnings, etc.) as the main basis for stratification of the working class. From such a perspective, the key factors dividing the class would be skill (skilled v. nonskilled), organization (union v. nonunion), education (college graduate v. non-college), property (self-employed v. employee), industry (monopoly v. competitive), race (white v. nonwhite), nationality (especially citizenship status) and sex. These factors have many implications, but here would be
understood primarily in the context of providing either privilege or disprivilege in labor market competition, and between sectors of the working class and the employers.

The privileged strata might thereby be understood to be: (1) the proletarianized sectors of professional, managerial, and technical personnel. These gain a privileged position in the labor market primarily due to their relatively scarce educational credentials. (2) Self-employed manual workers. (3) skilled employees. (4) unionized nonskilled employees in the monopoly industries.

The disprivileged would be: (1) marginally employed workers. (2) unorganized nonskilled employees in the competitive industries ("periphery"). (3) the lower paid clerical and retail workers. (4) nonskilled farm employees.

In addition, I believe a theory of stratification of the class should include middle strata, not just privileged and disprivileged (or upper and lower) strata. Such middle strata are particularly important in the U.S. which, due to its dominant world position in the international capitalist economy, provides a much higher average wage than any other country. These middle strata would, then, be those workers whose earnings were close to the median, and might consist of: (1) unorganized nonskilled employees in the monopoly industries. (2) organized nonskilled employees in the competitive industries. (3) the higher paid clerical (administrative assistants, bookkeepers, executive and legal secretaries, etc.) and the higher paid retail workers. Many of these workers are unionized.

Hierarchical of Economic Strata

A. Privileged Upper Strata (Labor Aristocracy)
   1. Proletarianized professional, administrative, technical personnel
   2. Self-employed manual workers
   3. Skilled employees
   4. Higher paid unionized nonskilled workers in monopoly industries and services

B. Middle Strata
   1. Lower paid unionized nonskilled workers in monopoly industries and services
   2. Unionized nonskilled workers in non-monopoly industries and services, excluding farmworkers
   3. Unorganized nonskilled workers in monopoly industries
   4. Higher paid unorganized clerical and retail workers

C. Lower Strata
   1. Unorganized nonskilled workers in non-monopoly industries and services
   2. Other clerical and retail workers
   3. Nonskilled farm workers
   4. Marginally and unemployed
In addition to stratification based directly on economic competition and differentials within the class, it needs to be recognized that racism and nationality oppression (meaning discrimination against foreign nationals, especially from the Third World, within the U.S.) produce distinct divisions in the class which are politically potent. These divisions overlap with the economic stratification, which in my opinion underlies the potency of the racial and nationality divisions themselves. In particular, minority workers are disproportionately found in the lower strata of the class while white workers dominate the upper strata. Sex divisions are important but not as potent owing to the continuing predominance of the nuclear family, so this division too must be separately analyzed and fit into the theory.

Obviously, this is crude and needs much empirical research to refine. Probably I have left out parts of the workforce; for example, it is unclear where non-manual and non-clerical government workers fit in. Also, most unionized workers at, for example, the telephone or power companies probably are in the middle strata rather than the upper strata. In addition, it still lacks a definite analysis of the role and mechanisms of the intervention of capitalists in dividing the working class, which was also omitted by Form. But I think it demonstrates the possibility of utilizing a clearcut framework of competition among workers to clarify the stratification of the class, and shows the useful foundations laid by William Form.

Conclusion

As I have scattered my main theoretical commentary throughout the text, I will conclude with a few speculative remarks about the future of working class stratification in the U.S.

I believe the international dominance of the U.S. over the rest of the capitalist world, and its position in the world as a whole, will continue to decline in the years to come as Japan, Western Europe, some of the newly industrialized countries (e.g. Brazil and South Korea) and the socialist countries make advances. This will further cut into the capacity of the monopolies to provide economic stability and upward mobility to so many Americans. Like Thurow and Bluestone and Harrison, I believe it will also result in a further trend toward inequality, as relatively higher paid, unionized industrial jobs are lost and relatively lower paid service jobs are created.

I also concur with Form that inequality will increase not only in the society as a whole, but also within the working class. Although his notion that the working class will assume an "hour glass shape" may be a bit overstated, his general prediction is well taken. Form expects skilled workers, foremen, self-employed manual workers and proletarianized professional, technical and administrative workers to hold their own or even grow modestly. This prediction is based on the growing number and complexity of machines to manipulate and repair, as well as the need to closely supervise complex work. However, like Bluestone and Harrison, he expects the greatest growth to be among nonskilled workers in the economic periphery, especially services. The industrial core of nonskilled workers will continue to decline. He also thinks that
the structurally unemployed and marginally employed will continue to expand, as mature capitalism has presented no evidence of a capacity or will to stem this trend. (p. 256)

Form sees possible downward pressure on the wages of the skilled, especially if women, Blacks, and Hispanics gain slow access to skilled trades. However, the lower strata—nonskilled workers in the periphery—will probably bear the brunt of wage pressures. In short, rather than the decline of the U.S. role in the world resulting in a more homogeneous U.S. working class, it is possible, even likely, that the opposite may occur. Due to the decline of unionized industrial workers in monopoly industries, as well as company attacks on them, the privileged upper strata may decline, even if its skilled and professional strata grow. The stratum of unionized industrial workers in the competitive industries will grow, but likely be pressed into the lower strata along with the fast growing non-union, nonskilled workers in the competitive industries and the also increasing marginally employed.

However, the prospect of working class divisions does not automatically translate into working class political passivity as some (such Gordon, Edwards and Reich) suggest. For the growth of the lower strata of the class may also be a harbinger of a resurgence of progressive working class politics.

In this respect, I agree with Form about the centrality of the trade union movement and the minority communities to the future of working class politics. In particular, the intersection of the advanced political level of the minority communities with their increased representation in the most expansive unions—those of government, education and services—provides hope for a rebirth of the working class movement. (p. 258).

In summary, I see an increasing liberal drift in American unions emanating primarily from changes in the sex, ethnic, and industrial composition of its members. The old craft unions will remain the most conservative, and the industrial unions will follow close behind. Unions in government, education, and services will represent a new and stronger left. These are the unions where blacks, Hispanics, and women are increasing their membership the most. This suggests that ethnic politics may become the country’s next major spring of political liberalism. The vigor and thrust of ethnic politics emanates from outside the labor movement. Perhaps ethnic organizations will embrace labor unions in their programs rather than labor embracing ethnic groups in the movement in the past. (pp. 262–263)

This is a hopeful scenario, and one that must be tracked carefully. Above all, it is one to fight for. The stirrings of such a motion are already underway. It is possible that a combination of an advance of actual political–social motion in this direction, combined with further research and debate, can lead to a consensus among progressives along these lines that might help press developments in a socially and politically positive direction.
REFERENCES (1)

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REFERENCES (2)


