



Inequality in the Contemporary World: Class, Caste, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

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Key Points

1. All people in the world today, even refugees, must deal with the authority of one **nation-state** or another, each of which contains multiple, and sometimes contradictory, hierarchies of stratification. Every one of these hierarchies is a cultural invention designed to create boundaries around different kinds of (what Benedict Anderson referred to as) imagined communities. Some patterns of stratification may reach back thousands of years, but others are closely associated with the rise of European capitalism and colonialism.
2. With increasing globalization, **stratified societies** are the most common. In stratified societies, higher-ranking groups have a disproportionate access to, and control over, wealth, power, and prestige. At times stratification can be minimal, as is seen in chiefdoms. In state societies, the stratification is elaborate and more clearly defined.

3. The concept of **class** in anthropology has a double heritage: Europeans tended to view class boundaries as closed and rigid, whereas North Americans tended to view them as open and permeable. **Clientage** relations that bind individuals to one another across class boundaries may undercut class solidarity.
4. Most North Americans assume that individuals here may pursue wealth, power, and prestige unhampered by class barriers. In practice though, some individuals do not easily realize class mobility. There are, for many people, limiting factors. One limiting factor is **race**. Although racial categories do not exist in biology, the social category of race has had an often negative and restricting impact on some people. W. Lloyd Warner has argued that the “colour bar” is in actuality a more rigid barrier than that which exists between castes in India.
5. The stratification system of India was taken as the prototype of caste stratification, although anthropologists have applied the concept to social hierarchies encountered elsewhere in the world. The term **caste** collapses into two different South Asian concepts: **varna** and **jāti**. Varna refers to the widespread notion that Indian society is ideally divided into four functional subdivisions: priest, nobility (rulers and warriors), commoners (farmers and merchants), and labourers and servers. Local caste divisions in Indian villages, referred to jātis, follow rules of purity and pollution defined in terms of the occupations their members perform and the foods they eat; these divisions also govern whom an individual may marry. Members of jātis of similar rank do not observe such distinctions with one another, especially in urban settings. Caste associations in large cities of India use jāti ties to promote their members’ economic well-being. At times, higher-ranking jātis have used violence to block the advance of lower-ranking jātis. Contemporary anthropologists reject views of caste in India that portray it as internally harmonious and uncontested by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, pointing to the rise in caste violence in recent years.
6. The contemporary concept of race developed in the context of European exploration and conquest beginning in the fifteenth century, as Europeans came to rule over Indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. The so-called “races,” whose boundaries were forged during the nineteenth century as justification for colonial rule, are constructed biological categories of division. Even though race as a biological category has been contested and dismissed, a global hierarchy persists in which whiteness symbolizes high status and blackness symbolizes the social bottom.
7. Although ethnic consciousness existed in pre-colonial and pre-capitalist societies, contemporary anthropologists have been most interested in forms of **ethnicity** that were generated under capitalist colonial domination, when different groups were subordinated within a single political structure under conditions of inequality. This process can produce **ethnic groups** not continuous with any single earlier group and is often characterized by nesting, opposed identities that individuals often manipulate in order to achieve upward mobility. When dominant ethnic groups feel threatened, they may attempt to stigmatize subordinate groups by “racializing” them.
8. Nation-states were invented in nineteenth-century Europe, but they have spread throughout the world along with capitalism, colonialism, and political decolonization. Nationalist thinking aims to create a political unit in which national identity and political territory coincide, and this has led to various practices designed to force subordinate social groups to adopt a national identity defined

primarily in terms of the culture of the dominant group. When subordinate groups resist, they may become the victims of genocide or ethnic cleansing. Alternatively, the dominant group may try to recast its understanding of national identity in a way that acknowledges and incorporates cultural elements belonging to sub-ordinate groups. If the creation of such an imagined hybrid identity is not accompanied by legal and political changes that support it, however, the end result may be political turmoil, as shown in Fiji.

9. Because membership in social categories such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, and nationality result in enormous differences in peoples' life chances, much is at stake in defending these categories and all may be described as if they were rooted in biology or nature rather than history or culture. Conceptualizing these forms of identity as essences is one way of stereotyping and excluding, but it has also been used by many stigmatized groups to build a positive self-image and as a strategic concept in struggles with dominant groups. Although **strategic essentialism** may be successful in such struggles, it also risks repeating the same logic that justifies oppression.
10. Despite past trends to minimize nationalism as an international threat to peace and good order, our current era seems full of politicians attempting to motivate people toward increased nationalistic tendencies. Many of the current world conflicts involve ethnic, religious, economic and other variations of the newly popular impulse toward nationalism.

Key Terms

Caste A ranked group whose membership is based on inherited social roles. Caste systems are closed (individuals cannot move from one caste to another), and they combine elements of tribal affiliation, endogamy, class, occupation, mores, and ritual.

Class A ranked group within a hierarchically stratified society whose membership is defined primarily in terms of wealth, occupation, and/or access to power.

Client The party of inferior status in a clientage.

Clientage The institution linking individuals from upper and lower levels in a stratified society.

Cline The gradual integration of genetic variation from population to population.

Colourism A system of social identities negotiated based on the situation along a continuum of skin colour between white and black.

Ethnic groups Social groups that are distinguished from one another on the basis of ethnicity.

Ethnicity A social classification based on a common cultural heritage and selected cultural features such as language, religion, or dress. Ethnicity emerges from historical processes that incorporate distinct social groups into a single political structure under conditions of inequality.

Jāti A caste that refers to localized, named, endogamous groups.

Nation A group of people believed to share the same history, culture, language, and even physical substance.

Nationalism The attempt made by government officials to instill a sense of nationality into the citizens of a state.

Nationality A sense of identification with and loyalty to a nation-state; membership, defined by citizenship, in a geopolitical sovereign state.

Nation-state An ideal political unit in which national identity and political territory coincide.

Objectification The intentional construction of a collective public identity; it is the process that produces what we commonly think of as ethnicity.

Patron The party of superior status in a clientage.

Phenotype Observable measurable outward characteristics of an organism.

Race A broad human population category that allegedly corresponds to distinct, heritable sets of biological attributes and often conflates geographic ancestry and physical type.

Racialism Belief in the existence of biologically distinct races.

Racism The systematic oppression of one or more socially defined “races” by another socially defined “race” that is justified in terms of the supposedly inherent biological superiority of the rulers and the supposed inherent biological inferiority of those they rule.

Reification A form of negative racial or ethnic absolutism that encourages the violent elimination of targeted groups and is central to the practice of racism.

Social race An achieved status with a racial label in a system of stratification that is composed of open, class-like categories to which racial labels are assigned.

Species A reproductive community of populations (reproductively isolated from others) that occupies a specific niche in nature.

Strategic essentialism The use of essentialist rhetoric as a conscious political strategy to create a temporary solidarity to facilitate a specific social action.

Stratified societies Societies in which there is a permanent hierarchy that accords some members privileged access to wealth, power, and prestige.

Transformist hegemony A nationalist program to define nationality in a way that preserves the cultural domination of the ruling group while including enough cultural features from subordinated groups to ensure their loyalty.

Varna Traditional social ranks that divide Indian society into four functional subdivisions: priests, nobility (rulers and warriors), commoners (farmers and merchants), and labourers or servants.

Review Questions

1. What are the differences between the caste system and the class system? How much mobility is possible in either one?
2. Reflect on the two understandings of class that inform anthropological thinking and discuss the merits of each. What do you think the role of class is in Canadian society today?
3. What does it mean to say that a nation is an “imagined community”? What is the role of naturalizing discourses in the imagining of a nation?
4. What are the values and dangers of nationalism? Should we be concerned about extreme nationalism in Canada?
5. What are the values and dangers of strategic essentialism? What examples of strategic essentialism can you find in Canada?
6. How has racialism impacted the lives of individuals? What influence did colonialism have in solidify belief in racial categories?
7. In what ways do class, race, ethnicity, and caste shape a person’s life chances? Relate this to Paul Farmer’s ideas about structural violence.
8. Discuss how the idea of nationalism taken to its extreme has been historically demonstrated to be very dangerous.
9. What characteristics that impact on individuals might race and caste share?
10. What characteristics distinguish ethnicity from nation?
11. While race is a meaningless biological category what social factors make it still seems so important in human affairs?
12. Other than governments, what forms of hegemony do we live under today?
13. Would life in a monocultural society be more or less interesting than it is in a multicultural society?

Additional Resources

Films

- Documentary Series: *As Long as the Rivers Flow*. Tamarack Productions. 1991.
Each documentary in this series chronicles the struggles of Indigenous Canadians as they fight to achieve self-determination.
 - *Time Immemorial*. Directed by Hugh Brody.
The Nisga'a of British Columbia take their case for land rights to the Supreme Court of Canada.
 - *Tikinagan*. Directed by Gil Cardinal.
The profile of a native-run child welfare service in northwestern Ontario.
 - *The Learning Path*. Directed by Loretta Todd.
Three native Elders from Edmonton work to improve the education system for their communities.
 - *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*. Directed by David Poisey and William Hansen.
A profile of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, which has become a model for Aboriginal broadcasters around the world.
 - *Flooding Job's Garden*. Directed by Boyce Richardson.
The Cree of James Bay fight the Quebec government to prevent the construction of a hydroelectric dam.

Annotated Video Links

- **Caste in India: an in-depth review** This short video provides an in-depth and current review of caste and class in India.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtgfVJ7Lb54>
- **Football and Spanish Nationalism** A current and fascinating short video that explores the Spanish national identity and its connection to the sport of football.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4YO9bNHHGU>
- **Race and Racism** A short, animated presentation that looks at race, racial classification and why races don't really exist in Homo sapiens.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS5B6FuyLNA>
- **Social Stratification** A brief video that features demonstrations in Toronto that highlight the realities of social stratification in Canadian society.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQj0MANOEsQ>

Websites

- “Europe invents the Gypsies: The dark side of modernity,” by Klaus-Michael Bogdal. February 24, 2012, *Eurozine*.

This article critically examines the role of European nationalism in the segregation of and discrimination against the Roma.

<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-02-24-bogdal-en.html>

A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

How Do We Decide Who Gets to Shape Our Nation’s Identity?

Most people do not play a direct role in constructing the identity of their nation. Rather, it is a nation’s leaders who choose, on behalf of the entire group, which cultural attributes to build on as they decide what shape the nation’s identity will take. The resulting identity is significant not only because it fosters a sense of community among group members, but also—and perhaps more importantly—because it defines who does and does not belong to the group. Group membership offers security and status, a place near the top (or at least somewhere in the middle) of the social hierarchy. Those who are denied group membership are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, with little to no social support. Thus, those who define national identity control what shape inequality will take within a nation. When these leaders are our representatives within a *nation-state*, the stakes become even higher, as they have the full force of governmental institutions, binding laws, and police and military forces behind them. The question of choosing the best leaders for the job, then, becomes paramount.

As Canadians, we must ask ourselves an important question: How do we choose our political leaders—those select few whose job it is to represent us and who, at the same time, have great power to influence our daily lives? Undoubtedly, this is a complex question. Different people have different priorities, and not everyone agrees on what makes a good leader. Yet we can begin to investigate some of the forces at work in this crucial decision-making process and, as a result, come to better understand ourselves and our society.

To begin, let's take a step back to consider what is important to us in a nation-state. For guidance, we can turn to the ideas of Clifford Geertz, one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century. Geertz understood the state not as a singularity but as the consolidation of three "themes":

1. status, or *estate* ("standing, rank, condition");
2. pomp, or *stateliness* ("splendor, display, dignity, presence"); and
3. governance, or *statecraft* ("regime, dominion, mastery") (1980: 121).

As Geertz observes, modern political discourse tends to focus on the third of these themes: governance, or *statecraft*. This is true not only in considerations of the state itself but also in considerations of state leaders. However, a major problem arises with this focus on statecraft: it "obscure[s] our understanding of the multiplex nature of high authority" (121). Indeed, too often it seems that we are so "impressed with command [that] we see little else" (121).

Yet the status and pomp of our political leaders *do* often influence how we perceive these leaders' ability to govern (i.e., their statecraft). This is especially true in our world of visual media, which bombards us with photographs, video recordings, and even live video streams that show us in high definition the stateliness—or lack thereof—of our political leaders. An early example of the power of video broadcasts to colour our perceptions of political leaders comes from the first televised US presidential debate, which took place in 1960 between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. The debate was broadcast simultaneously on television and radio. Americans who heard the debate on the radio found Nixon more compelling, while those who watched it on TV felt that Kennedy was the stronger leader. These stark differences in perception were attributed to appearance: Nixon, who had recently been ill and refused to wear makeup for the camera, looked sickly, pale, and tired; Kennedy, on the other hand, appeared healthy, tanned, and well-rested. In short, on TV, Kennedy outshone Nixon in terms of pomp and apparent status. Canada saw a similar drama play out in the first televised leaders' debate, which took place in 1968 among Tommy Douglas, Pierre Trudeau, Robert Stanfield, and R al Caouette. In terms of public perception, the results echoed those of the earlier Kennedy–Nixon debate, with Trudeau coming out on top and Stanfield suffering a fate similar to Nixon's.

Today, pomp, pageantry, and posing for the camera are the order of the day among politicians in North America and elsewhere. These public figures are well aware just how much image counts, and most take great pains to always look the part of a leader when appearing in public. Top politicians even hire publicists and “image-makers” to help them create and control their public persona. Most citizens take it for granted that politicians will appear polished and play the part of the politician. At the same time, few are consciously aware of the degree to which appearance and performance influence their perception—and ultimately their selection—of their leaders.

Is our cultural focus on the public image of our politicians necessarily a bad thing? No, but only as long as it is tempered with awareness that there is more to leadership than appearance. A key responsibility of the state is to care for its citizens, and we must assess our leaders with this responsibility in mind. Given Geertz’s assertion that the real business of politics is “social domination” (1980: 122), we would do well to choose carefully when selecting those by whom we will be dominated.