Social change refers to any significant change in the structure of society. Temporary changes within a society, such as fads and fashions, do not constitute social change. The election of a new president is not social change. But replacement of the presidency with a dictatorship changes the structure of government and is thus a social change. Most sociologists recognize four main types of social change.

One type of social change involves changes in the number and variety of positions and social roles. For example, as a society becomes more industrialized, the discovery of new technologies creates new and different jobs. The invention of the computer, for example, led to the creation of several new types of jobs, such as programmers, to help support its various uses.

A second kind of change occurs in the obligations or duties attached to positions. For example, as some societies have become more complex and parents have moved into the work force, the job of educating children has shifted from parents to schools.

These two types of change often lead to a third type of social change—new ways of organizing social activities. The establishment of child day-care centers and kindergartens, for example, occurred partly because families with working mothers and fathers needed help caring for their children. As new jobs become available, individuals who want them often need further education. Community, or junior, colleges were established in part to address this need for local, affordable advanced education.

A fourth kind of social change involves the redistribution of facilities and rewards, such as power, education, income, and respect. In 1950, for example, 30 percent of all students enrolled in colleges in the United States were women. Today, that number has nearly doubled.

Sometimes societies evolve gradually. Other times, they change abruptly, as in times of revolution or war. Change can result from planning, or it can be unintentional. It may or may not involve violence. Every society changes, but not all change at the same rate, in the same direction, or by the same means.

The German social philosopher Karl Marx claimed that the economy is the prime source of social change. Today, many sociologists think of societies as having multiple systems that influence one another. Change in one system may lead to change in others. For example, the introduction of the automobile and related forms of transportation are technological changes in the transportation system. These changes affected other social systems. Faster transportation allowed increased production and distribution of food, which helped advance the growth of grocery stores and reduce the need for people to grow their own food on family farms. City dwellers began moving to suburbs because transportation allowed people to live farther from city centers while still working there. Transportation advances have also affected where family members live in regard to one another. Family members often live farther apart than in the past, but improved transportation enables them to visit one another fairly easily. Timothy J. Bruce

See also **Culture** (How cultures change); **Social role; Sociology** (Social change).

Social class is a group of people who share a common status or position in society. Social classes represent differences in wealth, power, employment, family background, and other qualities. These qualities indicate a person's *socioeconomic status*—that is, his or her position in society as measured by social and economic factors. The process by which populations are divided into classes is called *social stratification.* All societies have some form of social stratification.

Because of their common experience, members of a social class often share similar values, behaviors, and political beliefs. In some cases, members of a social class work together to pursue collective goals. For instance, workers in an industry may form a labor union to seek improvements in wages, working conditions, and standard of living. The collective actions of a class can bring about significant social change or even revolution. See **Labor movement; Revolution; Social change.**

Class structure. The system of social classes in a society is called the *class structure.* At the top of the class structure are the wealthiest people and people who have significant power and influence in society. The middle of the class structure includes people who have secure jobs and a comfortable standard of living. Most people in the United States and other developed countries identify with this category, which is often called the *middle class.* Below this category are people who work low-paying jobs or who are temporarily unemployed. This group is sometimes called the *lower class* or *working class.*

The boundaries between social classes vary from one country to another. In most Western democracies—including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada—the class structure is largely informal. Such countries allow for some degree of *social mobility.* In other words, it is possible for a person to move from one class to another through his or her actions and achievements.

In some countries, however, each person is born into a certain social class and has an *ascribed* (assigned) social status. In such cases, moving to another class may be difficult or impossible. A class with extremely rigid boundaries is sometimes called a *caste.* In India, for instance, people have traditionally been organized into castes that determine their social status and influence what occupations they might hold. Under this system, children almost always occupy the same class position as their parents. See **Caste; India** (Social structure).

Communism has long promoted the ideal of a "classless" society, in which there are no distinctions based on social class. But in China and other Communist nations—just as in non-Communist nations—certain groups of people, such as government officials, have had much more power, wealth, and prestige than others. See **Communism** (Communism in theory).

How people are categorized. Social scientists have used a variety of methods to compare and rank individuals and groups.

The German philosopher Karl Marx, in the 1800's, identified two classes in a capitalist system. One class, called the *capitalist class* or the *bourgeoisie,* controlled the resources needed to hire workers and to produce goods. The other, the working class or *proletariat,* consisted of people whose chief resource was their own labor. In this system, classes are distinct groups that are

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Members of a social class often share similar values, behaviors, and customs. The formally dressed people shown here are gathered at a British social event, the Royal Ascot horse races.

defined primarily by their relationships to one another. Marx believed that the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was marked by a *class struggle*. He believed that the struggle would end—and classes would disappear—when workers seized control of industry and the government. See **Communism** (The ideas of Marx); **Marx, Karl.**

Many social scientists categorize people based on the amount of money they have. Traditionally, people with more money have ranked higher in the class structure than people with less money. However, wealth is usually just one of several factors that determines a person's status. Other factors include education, occupation, and community involvement. Firefighters and members of government, for instance, are highly regarded in most societies, even though their incomes may not be especially high. People whose jobs require leadership, responsibility, or special expertise usually have high status.

Some scholars use *life chances* as an indicator of social class. Life chances, as described by the German sociologist Max Weber, reflect the sets of resources, opportunities, and choices available to a person. A person's life chances depend largely on money, education, and support from family and the community.

Every society consists of members of numerous cultural groups, sometimes called *identity groups*. Such groups may be distinguished by race, ethnicity, sex, religion, or cultural practices. Although these groups are distinct from social classes, they may still contribute to the process of social stratification. For instance, widespread discrimination against women or minority groups can limit job opportunities and drive people into lower classes.

Debate over classes. Some sociologists believe that social classes benefit society. A society, they argue, must have a system of rewards that encourages people to undertake certain essential jobs. Many important occupations involve high levels of stress and require advanced education and training. People may be unlikely to pursue such jobs unless they are rewarded with a high income. As a result, these sociologists claim that varying levels of income—and therefore different social classes—help ensure that workers are available for all of society's necessary jobs.

Other sociologists claim that social classes are not a necessary part of society. They argue that large differences in income or prestige only benefit people at the top of the class structure. Most social scientists have opinions somewhere between these two positions. They believe that some social stratification may be necessary for society. However, they also believe that large differences between upper and lower classes do not benefit society.

Philip N. Cohen

See also **Aristocracy; Middle class; Minority group; Poverty.**

Additional resources

Brooks, David. *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There.* Simon & Schuster, 2001.
Payne, Geoff, ed. *Social Divisions.* St. Martin's, 2000.
Perelman, Michael. *Class Warfare in the Information Age.* 1998. Reprint. St. Martin's, 1999.
Zweig, Michael. *The Working Class Majority.* ILR Pr., 2000.
Zweig, Michael, ed. *What's Class Got to Do with It? American Society in the Twenty-First Century.* ILR Pr., 2004.

Social Darwinism is the belief that people in society compete for survival and that superior individuals, social groups, and races are those which become powerful and wealthy. Social Darwinism applies Charles R. Darwin's theories on evolution to the development of society. Darwin, a British naturalist, explained his theories in 1859 in the book *The Origin of Species* (see **Evolution** [Darwin's theory]). He believed all plants and animals had *evolved* (developed naturally) from a few common ancestors. He proposed that evolution occurred through a process called *natural selection*. In this process, the organisms best suited to their environment are the ones most likely to survive and produce organisms like themselves.

Social Darwinism applies the idea of natural selection to society, trying to explain differences in achievement and wealth among people. According to the theory, individuals or groups must compete with one another to survive. The principles of natural selection favor the survival of the fittest members of society. Such individuals or groups adapt successfully to the social environment, while those that are unfit fail to adapt successfully.

Social Darwinists assert that those individuals best able to survive show their fitness by accumulating property, wealth, and social status. Poverty, according to the theory, proves an individual's or group's unfitness.

Social Darwinism has been criticized by a large number of social scientists because the theory fails to consider that some people inherit power and influence merely by being born into wealthy families. Critics claim these people or groups owe their good fortune more to their higher social rank than to any natural superiority.