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Joseph Drew

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**Pointers From Sociology:
Looking at Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*.
New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2016**

Reviewed by Joseph Drew

1. The book is a study of a basic change in social stratification. It is also a study of poverty in South Africa. Plus, it is a study of the changing nature of community and society in that land.

We know that almost every society organizes inequality by ranking categories of people in a hierarchy. Four important principles of social stratification are:

- Social stratification is inclusive of all, not a reflection of individual differences, and shapes our lives.
- Social stratification carries over from generation to generation.
- Social stratification is universal but variable.
- Social stratification involves both inequality and beliefs about the nature of the stratification, that is, why it is fair for people to be unequal.¹

Further, societies may be characterized as open, that is permitting social mobility, up or down the ranks, or closed, allowing little or none.

Major types of social stratification might include:

- Social Class (based on birth and individual achievement, allowing social mobility).
- Caste (based on birth or ascription) (ex: India, the feudal system, apartheid), endogamous marriage

In addition, there are two horrible forms of stratification:

- Slavery (based on permanent degradation, people owning people); serfdom (people tied to a certain piece of land); bonded labor.²

¹ Most introductory texts in sociology carry a chapter on this subject. See, for example, Chapter Eight, entitled *Social Stratification*, in *Society: The Basics*, 13th ed., by John J. Macionis. Pearson, 2015.

² An estimated forty-five million people are today slaves. The International Labor Organization estimates that, by their definitions, over forty million people are in some form of slavery today. 24.9 million people are in forced labor, of whom sixteen million people are exploited in the private sector such as domestic work, construction, or agriculture; 4.8 million persons in forced sexual exploitation, and four million persons in forced labor imposed by state authorities. An additional 15.4 million people are in forced marriages. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_21st_century)

Also, see Freedom United (<https://www.freedomunited.org/news/>); this is the premier anti-slavery society in the world, I believe. It lists materials on the following major forms or aspects of slavery today: forced labor; debt bondage; human trafficking; child slavery; forced marriage; domestic slavery; prison slavery; other aspects of contemporary slavery.

- Genocide (targeted groups are to be killed); suttee.

Noah was born at a time of apartheid, caste in South Africa. This system was a police state, racial apartness rigidly enforced, especially from 1948, with the rise to power of the Reunited National Party, to 1994. Under that system, everyone belonged to one of four groups: European whites; Cape Coloured; Native Africans; Indians.³ There was strictly enforced separation in all aspects of life.

However, it is reasonable to argue from this book that, as a result of political change, South Africa is slowly moving sociologically from caste relationships to social class structures. (Note: South Africa did have slavery, which ended in 1834, much to the opposition of many Afrikaners, descendants of early, mostly Dutch settlers).

This does not mean that social stratification does not exist. On the contrary — it persists, only under a social class system. It is based on race, or rather ethnic nationality, with millions of people condemned to live on the margins of society, very poor, little chance of meaningful employment, living in shantytowns. Others, mostly whites, live better.

To see apartheid in perspective, we might compare it with the US, but more profitably from the sociological perspective, by considering the varying and ever-changing white treatment of, and adjustment to, the range of Native Americans people, African Americans, other groups such as Eskimos, Aleuts, Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, Guamanians, Virgin Islanders, Samoans, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands natives, and so forth.⁴ We see a whole, complex series of types of stratification.

³ Noah makes the argument that these divisions were artificial and made no rational sense. An example: He reports on Page 75 that the South African government labeled Japanese people as “white” and Chinese people as “black.” There were not enough Chinese people to make up a whole separate classification for them, but the government wanted to establish good relations with the Japanese “in order to import their fancy cars and electronics. So Japanese people were given honorary white status while Chinese people stayed black.”

⁴ The Supreme Court may take up the infamous “insular cases” this term. Reports the American Civil Liberties Union: In the Insular Cases, the Supreme Court spoke to whether, and to what extent, the rights and protections guaranteed by the Constitution applied to residents in the then-new territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. In a string of cases decided from 1901 to 1922, the court described the territories’ inhabitants as “alien races” and “savage tribes.” The court based its views squarely on the presumed racial inferiority of the non-white people who lived there. In doing so, the Supreme Court showed obvious contempt for the predominately Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander residents of these territories. The Insular Cases are unabashedly racist, firmly rooted in white supremacy, and still haunt the day-to-day lives of millions of people. See: <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/the-most-racist-supreme-court-cases-youve-probably-never-heard-of>.

Relations between Europeans and native peoples began early for both countries. Both had slavery for some and expulsion for others. In South Africa, there was some slavery, but mostly there were complex struggles involving many nationalities, which still exists. The election of 1948 destroyed forward motion, however, and this led South Africa to an ultimately doomed, detestable institutionalization of apartheid for a half century.

Finally, sociology might point out that the end of apartheid did not spell the end of social or economic inequality in South Africa, just as the adoption of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments in the US did not end social or economic inequality in our country.

2. Efforts to maintain racial segregation emerged and persisted in both societies, especially in the American South and across South Africa. In South Africa, as Noah shows, under apartheid police enforced strict personal laws — no sexual relations among the four groups. That was not the case in America, mostly. Possibly we can compare today's South Africa to a form of Jim Crow, semi-apartheid, semi-slavery.

Overall, we can look at social evolution after apartheid as a movement from complete stasis to some social mobility. Possibly, in the future we will see a breakthrough moment, comparable to the Civil Rights Movement here in the United States, when economic and social change will accelerate.

In his book *Class and Caste in a Southern Town*, John Dollard examined the society of the South post-Civil War.⁵ We can describe Southern U.S. society by imagining a box with a horizontal line in the middle — in terms of prestige, all whites are on top, all blacks are on bottom. Education, wealth, and culture were of less importance. But, in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and the ending of Jim Crow, perhaps that line rotated toward a more vertical position. The tilt changed.

Social separation persisted, but social class structures became more equal. As assimilation and integration proceed, it is probable that the line will begin to fade away.

Both Justice Gorsuch and Justice Sotomayor have expressed their opposition to the bigotry found in these case and have indicated that they hope these cases will soon be overruled.

⁵ See: <https://www.amazon.com/Caste-Class-Southern-Town-Dollard/dp/0299121348> or, for the Third Edition, Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957.

3. Moreover, we can note the importance in South Africa of language differences; these track ethnic differences. There are eleven official languages. The most popular language spoken is Zulu, followed by Xhosa and then Afrikaans. We may perhaps label Nelson Mandela, the former African National Congress leader, imprisoned for years, hero to many, who became the first post-apartheid president, the George Washington of South Africa. He pushed the adoption of the new, beautiful national anthem, which employs five of the major languages and incorporates both the song of the ANC former insurgents and that of the formerly ruling Apartheid regime.

This differs from the U.S., where in general most people speak, at least in public, one language, English. While this is not the case in some parts of the country (especially in the territories), the implication for sociology would be that we tend to think and explain in ways that are comprehensible to the vast majority of the population. This leads to social implications far beyond the languages spoken.

Sociology tells us that the language we speak conditions the way we think. Each language carries its own worldview and so each language shapes the way its speakers conceptualize everything.

According to what is known variously as the Whorfian Hypothesis, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, we see the world through our language, and language precedes thought.⁶ Moreover, Whorf maintained that language is not a given. “Rather, it is culturally determined, and it encourages a distinctive interpretation of reality by focusing our attention on certain phenomena.”⁷ If this is so, there are structural impediments remaining that block South Africa from fully achieving a social class system to replace the old caste system. However, we can point to Switzerland, with its four official languages — five, if you count English, which is in widespread use — to argue against the power of the Whorfian Hypothesis.

It also relates to the sociological principle known as the *Definition of the Situation*. W.I. Thomas originally developed this.⁸ If we define a situation as real, it is real to us in terms of its consequences. What South Africans just out of apartheid define as real, they act upon as if it were real.

⁶ See, for instance: Richard T. Schaefer, *Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, 9th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011, p. 64

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64, quoting Sapir in 1929.

⁸ See: William I. Thomas, *The Four Wishes and the Definition of the Situation*. A selection from the original is found on Pages 741 to 744 of *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*, ed. by Talcott Parsons, Edwards Shils, Kaspar Naeglele, and Jesse Pitts. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1965.

It is perception that counts. Ethnic differences are powerful; in the United States we also define the word “race” as if it were real in terms of biology, which essentially it is not, and then act as if it were real.

4. Noah refers in his book to the word “Ghetto.” This means in popular parlance a part of town where minorities reside. However, today in both countries there is no legal requirement that certain people must reside there. We see through history an evolution in that aspect.

Originally, Jews in Europe were restricted to life in the ghetto; it was legally established and coercive, crowded, poor, unsanitary. There were walls around the ghetto. When a horn blew or a bell sounded at evening time, all Jews had to be within the walls of the ghetto, and no Christians could be there. The gates were bolted shut all night. A similar pattern was found in Shi’ite countries. The ghetto as a legal mandate re-emerged in Europe under the Nazis, only in this case it was created as a waystation to mass murder.

In South Africa ghettos, or in a larger context, “homelands,” popularly called “Bantustans,” were originally not legally required. However, in the latter stages of apartheid, after 1970, they were.

Many people were shoved away from urban areas, to be resettled in artificially created new countries such as Transkei and Venda. The aim was to strip Black South Africans of their citizenship in the Republic of South Africa.

Additionally, residence in the large cities was racialized for those who remained there, and, with the passage of a 1923 law, Africans were increasingly forced into certain so-called townships, often suburbs. Black people required passes to move around the country. With the fall of apartheid, the laws were changed, and residency relaxed.

In the United States ghettos developed as an urban phenomenon, and they were not legally mandated, even though redlining prevented residence for some people in certain walled-off areas. Thus, restrictive covenants in Washington, D.C., said that homes with such covenants “shall not be sold to any person of the Semitic race, blood or origin which racial description can be deemed to include Jews, Hebrews, Armenians, Persians and Syrians.”⁹ This lasted until a Supreme Court decision in 1948 outlawed restrictive real estate covenants.

⁹ <https://www.washingtonjewishweek.com/researchers-look-at-where-jews-and-blacks-werent-allowed-to-go/>.

Native American reservations were also large ghettos — especially horrible in their creation, such as those designated by President Andrew Jackson and seen in the Trail of Tears as Indians were moved from Georgia, Alabama, and Florida to unfamiliar territory in Oklahoma.

Also, there was the existence of “sundowner” or “sundown” locations. African Americans could do business there during the day, but they were forced to leave during the evening. This lasted in some places until the 1960s.

Thus, sociologically speaking, ghettos appeared, disappeared, re-appeared; they were legal or voluntary; massive or smaller. All were attempts to create physical barriers to separate groups of people.

5. In the book we see the powerful importance of religion in South Africa. All groups were focused on religion, including the Afrikaners, the British, and the various African populations. But we see in the book especially the centrality of religion for African people. Noah’s mother insisted on going to church four times each week, and she was deeply religious. Interestingly, he writes that of the three churches his mother and he attended weekly, one was white, one was black, and one was mixed in population.

Similarly, there is almost no social institution more central to African American life than the church. It has been a focal point for centuries, the solid rock of community that has been pivotal for Black expression of community.¹⁰ The same seems to be true of life in South Africa.

Sociologists might note that the Sunday School movement, and the stress on church attendance, arose in Industrial Revolution England as a device that would facilitate the creation of a docile worker force. You might be last in this life, but in heaven the last shall be first.

6. Another parallel Noah mentions, one seen around the world, including in the United States and South Africa, is the presence of divide and conquer strategies. This was employed by the British throughout their empire. They set one local group against the other, and thus the British were able to rule both.

Noah shows in this book the example of the terrible, mostly manufactured hostility between the Zulu people, and their Inkatha movement, and the Xhosa people, with their African National Congress movement.

¹⁰ See, for instance, the recent book by Prof. Henry Louis Gates Jr., entitled *This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*. New York: Penguin Press, 2021.

They had been convinced, many of them, that members of the other group were enemies, even though leaders of both concentrated on fighting the apartheid laws and the Nationalist government. We see in the book, in Chapter One, entitled “Run,” the manifestation of this hostility. Two Zulu drivers, angry at the Xhosas, and misogynist as well, almost killed young Trevor, his brother, and his mother. The three of them had to leap out of a moving minibus, and run for dear life, chased by the two aggressors.

In the United States we see examples of the attempt to divide minorities, although in a more subtle, less violent way. Thus, over the last several decades, Asian Americans often are labeled unfairly as the “model minority,” as opposed to other minorities, in a comparison that today’s right wing, Trump-leaning Republicans are using for electoral advantage and as a way to express their disrespect for African Americans. Similarly, the same individuals claim to oppose “illegal” immigrants but not “legal” immigrants, a new and specious argument used to garner support from some people who are already voters when, in actuality, these right wingers tend to dislike all immigrants. It was evident in the Trump administration, when many barriers were thrown up against immigrants, including “legal” ones.

7. Both societies reveal the presence of what sociologists call “the Marginal Man.”

This is a person with his or her feet in two worlds — for example, George Santayana, the celebrated Harvard philosopher, who was brought up in Spain but who moved when young to an English-speaking environment.

The marginal man sees the world from more than one perspective and thus, according to Robert Park:

The marginal man is a personality type that arises at a time and a place where, out of the conflict of races and cultures, new societies, new peoples and cultures are coming into existence. The fate which condemns him to live, at the same time, in two worlds, is the same which compels him to assume, in relation to the worlds in which he lives, the role of a cosmopolitan and a stranger...

Inevitably he becomes, relative to his cultural milieu, the individual with the wider horizon, the keener intelligence, the more detached and rational viewpoint. The marginal man is always relatively the more civilized human being.¹¹

¹¹ See Parsons et al, *ibid.*, p. 946.

Clearly, as we see in this book, the author, Trevor Noah, is a prototypical marginal man. He was born “a crime,” as the title says, because his mother was African in origin and his father European.

Noah writes of how, for example, he became a “tuck shop” hustler — he fit into no group in his school, so he could understand and relate to all of them. His marginality was revealed throughout the book — in his own family, when he was not treated equally with other children, but often in a superior way, being viewed as white; in his school, where he opted to join the less scholarly “B” group and leave the more advanced “A” group, because he felt closer to African culture; in his adherence to the white group while under arrest; and in his early roles as a disc jockey and seller of compact discs.

Another “marginal man” in the book is his mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah. He describes how she left her family home, both in the city and in the homeland.¹² She was fluent in English and obtained training as a secretary and typist and that enabled her to get a job in a large organization, “the bottom rung of the white-collar world,” where she was hired on, given the “token hiring of black workers in low-level white jobs.”

She lived in an apartment in a location officially off-limits to Africans. She decided to have a child with a white man, against all the rules of the apartheid system.

In many ways, the book is a testimonial to the outstanding achievements of a woman who refused to be defeated by a social system set up specifically to destroy individuals like her — a real heroine for the modern world.

Trevor Noah’s remarkable success in life rests both on his natural abilities as a comic but also on his ability to express how people of various groups talk and how they see the world. It is instructive to look at many of the YouTube videos he has made on this very subject. He is able to understand the larger South African approach to life and society, for example, as well as the way the constituent elements of that culture understand it — the Afrikaners, for example; the Xhosas; the hustlers; the rich people in the expensive suburbs; the Jews; members of his dysfunctional family; the different sports played by different social class and races; the “hood” vs. the “cheese boys” (pp. 207 – 209).

¹² See Noah’s Chapter Five, “The Second Girl,” on pages 63 to 74.

Noah clearly has been able all his life to straddle the interstitial areas between many communities. Never defeated by the apartheid of his earlier life (he was still relatively young when democracy came to South Africa), Trevor Noah became an international star, I believe, because of his status as a brilliant marginal man, straddling worlds apart.

Sociologically, we may add that the theory of the Marginal Man rests close to that of “double consciousness,” as explained by W.E. B. Dubois. To quote the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

Double-consciousness is a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward “twoness” putatively experienced by African Americans because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society. The concept is often associated with William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, who introduced the term into social and political thought, famously, in his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).¹³

8. Another parallel between the United States and South Africa emerges from this book. South Africa during young Noah’s life was clearly a society in political, social, and economic transition. It was moving from apartheid to a more open, multiethnic society. This was bitterly fought against by many of the Afrikaners, but it became evident by the end of the run of apartheid that it was holding back the country. The white people actually voted in 1992 to end the odious system, and democracy itself became a reality in 1994.

One of the great books to explain the tragic fall of progressive hopes and the rise of Apartheid South Africa is Alan Paton’s work, *South Africa Tragedy: The Life and Times of Jan Hofmeyr*.¹⁴ South Africa could have followed another, more progressive path had not a technical accident of electoral laws enabled the Nationalists, extremists even within the Afrikaner population, to win power in 1948.

In that election Gen. Jan C. Smuts and Jan Hofmeyr led the United Party; they advocated a path of “Christian trusteeship” in which the whites would guide the African population into the modern world. They wanted some representation on elected bodies for the non-whites.

¹³ See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>.

¹⁴ Alan Paton, *South African Tragedy: The Life and Times of Jan Hofmeyr*, abridged by Dudley C. Lunt. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965.

Opposed were the (Reunited) Nationalist Party led by Dr. Daniel Malan, a bigot and advocate of complete social separation between whites (Dutch and British, principally) and the other three groups — Coloreds, Asians, and Africans.

The United Party obtained more votes in the election, but they were not cast in the correct locations, so the Nationalists won more seats in parliament. Then began their reign of terror known as apartheid. South Africa changed course in the early 1990s. It became a real democracy, one person, one vote, a government of, by, and for the people. Today it is striving toward social and economic equality.

To me, though, the voices of the racists and bigots from that long ago era of 1948 sound like historical predecessors of the similar shouts that have emerged in the United States from the Trump campaign of 2016 and thereafter. And, just like the situation in 1948 South Africa, Hillary Clinton gathered millions more votes from the electorate, but in the wrong location. Biden could have lost in 2020, even though he, too, received millions more votes than Trump, had roughly 50,000 of those votes been cast in the wrong geographical locations.

9. Here are some additional brief sociological observations that arise from reading Trevor Noah's book:
 - Women often served in South Africa under apartheid as heads of the family household, as African men were away working in mines or factories, in jail, or in exile.¹⁵
 - There were Black snitches and “blackjacks” (for police).¹⁶ This can be compared to the Jewish Kapos and police who served the Nazis.
 - We see throughout the book examples of what Kurt Lewin called “leaders from the periphery.”¹⁷ Social stratification based on skin color is mentioned and discussed frequently in the book. (“If you’re Black, stay back.”) This parallels an American phenomenon.
 - Note that in the US recent census reports show a huge rise in self-reported mixed ancestry. By contrast to South Africa, the United States has no history of the development of an entire population of “coloureds” such as South Africa does. We did have social differentiation and classifications as “mulatto,” “quadroon,” and so forth, however. The importance of such designations has greatly diminished, especially since the presidency of Barack Obama, it appears.

¹⁵ See Noah, page 38.

¹⁶ Ibid., see page 29-30.

¹⁷ See Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1948. Pages 195-197.

- Noah states on Page 74 the problem of “black people (who) had internalized the logic of apartheid and made it their own.” Does this parallel the situation for some African Americans during Jim Crow? According to Lewin, noted above, this did apply to many Jews, especially during the Holocaust.
- On Page 196, Noah stated that the world knows about the Holocaust and the evils of Hitler because of documentation and numbers. But in the Belgian Congo and Angola, he has written, the Europeans didn't even count the numbers of Africans murdered. “But when you read through the history of atrocities against Africans, there are no numbers, only guesses. It's harder to be horrified by a guess.” Since the book was published, Germans and Belgians have moved to apologize for these murders. Is Noah correct about the Holocaust? People knew and wouldn't talk about it for years.
- Neither the freedmen in the United States after 1865 nor the Africans following the fall of apartheid were provided with the economic means to escape the situations they were in *ab initio*. Both larger societies failed to repair the damage done to the oppressed population and both failed to provide for economic escalators to bring about real equality.
- Sociologist Milton Gordon coined the term “eth-class” to describe how we in the United States might see ourselves today — upper middle class Chinese American, for example.¹⁸ He writes that, “the intersection of the ethnic group with the social class is fast becoming the essential form of the subsociety in America.” Both our ethnicity and our social class contribute to our social location. Is South Africa moving to acquire a similar pattern? One difference is that American society encourages assimilation; South Africa divides up on linguistic and tribal lines, geographically and socially. That might imply that “eth-class” isn't as relevant in South Africa as in the U.S. today.
- Noah argues that South Africa as a midpoint in the Europe-Asia trade might not have lasted in importance; it was the discovery of diamonds and gold that brought on European settlement, violent conflict and ultimate racially based dominance. In the United States, the benefits of the gold rush were not evenly distributed in society. Moreover, the Chinese who came to the United States for the gold rush in 1849 were forced to pay a monthly tax for the privilege of participating in it. They soon reaped mostly racist reactions from competing white workers.

10. Finally, we might ask, from the sociological perspective, who is a real American? Who is a legitimate South African? Who is seen as a full member of this state and of this society?

¹⁸ Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

The concept of who is incorporated into American society, into the American community, has been evolving since the foundation years. Originally, white males were in, African and native others were out.

Then, the Civil War, with the resultant 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, established that African Americans were fully Americans, too, although this was first a political inclusion and then, following the Civil Rights Movement a century later, came social inclusion, membership in the community.

When the United States won the Mexican War and the Spanish-American War, and incorporated Hawaii, it became a more complicated question as to who was an American. The debates in Congress over the Organic Act for Hawaii revealed the hypocrisy of territorial expansion as some sought to not expand the electorate while simultaneously expanding the territory.

Finally, the abolition of the horrid National Origins Quota Act and the new immigration laws of 1965 led to a revised definition once more of who is an American. A multiethnic, multicultural, more cosmopolitan American people are arising. According to the Census Bureau, as of about 2044 the Americans will become a “majority minority” people — very different from colonial days. The American definition of the American nation has steadily expanded.

We see in *Born a Crime* a peaceful social and political revolution working itself out. South Africa is not the United States, and it might seem that dividing up by language serves to maintain social differences, rather than encourage assimilation of the many peoples of South Africa.

Nonetheless, it is evident that South Africa has moved a great distance politically and sociologically in the past three decades or so.

Thanks to this outstanding book, we can hope that the South African journey toward social harmony will, albeit if by fits and starts, arrive ultimately at the goal of that sought by the American people as well, one nation indivisible.