Subculture, Stratification, and Status:
Toward a Unified Theory of Opportunity Stratification

By Cliff Potts, CSO, and Editor-in-Chief of WPS News

Baybay City, Leyte, Philippines — September 8, 2026 — 8:45 a.m. ET

Introduction

Modern societies frequently claim that success is primarily the result of talent, discipline, and hard work. Yet more than a century of sociological and economic research suggests that opportunity is never distributed evenly. Cultural expectations may encourage individuals to pursue wealth, recognition, and status, but the pathways to achieving those goals are often shaped by structural conditions beyond individual control.

This essay proposes that several well-established theories in sociology and criminology, when considered together, reveal a broader pattern. Stratified opportunity, elite status preservation, subculture formation, and moral justification mechanisms combine to produce recurring cycles of social strain. Understanding this pattern may help explain persistent tensions in modern political and economic systems. This essay presents a structured framework for understanding how these forces interact in practice and is intended as a foundation for further analysis and refinement as conditions evolve.

Stratified Opportunity and Structural Strain

One of the most influential explanations of social strain was offered by sociologist Robert K. Merton. Merton argued that modern societies encourage individuals to pursue widely shared cultural goals—particularly economic success and social status—while legitimate means of achieving those goals remain unevenly distributed (Merton, 1938).

When individuals are encouraged to pursue goals that are structurally unattainable, tension emerges between aspiration and opportunity. Merton referred to this condition as strain. Individuals may respond to this strain in different ways: some continue to conform to the system, others innovate by pursuing alternative methods of success, and still others reject or withdraw from the system entirely.

The key insight is that deviance often reflects structural conditions rather than individual moral failure.

Subcultures and Adaptive Responses

Albert K. Cohen expanded this analysis by demonstrating how groups facing blocked opportunities frequently develop subcultures that redefine status and legitimacy (Cohen, 1955). Within such subcultures, behaviors rejected by mainstream society may become sources of recognition and prestige.

Subcultures therefore function as adaptive responses to exclusion from dominant pathways of success. They provide alternative systems of meaning, belonging, and recognition when mainstream institutions fail to deliver equitable opportunities.

These dynamics are not limited to criminal subcultures. Political movements, economic classes, and cultural communities may all develop distinct subcultural identities in response to perceived marginalization.

Elite Status Preservation

While individuals and groups respond to blocked opportunity through adaptation, those who benefit from existing systems often resist reforms that might redistribute opportunity more broadly.

Economist Albert O. Hirschman observed that privileged groups frequently deploy recurring rhetorical arguments against reform, claiming that change will either be futile, harmful, or dangerous (Hirschman, 1991). These rhetorical strategies tend to protect existing power arrangements.

Political economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson similarly argue that extractive institutions often persist because elites fear losing power if structural reforms are implemented (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Even reforms that might strengthen long-term institutional stability may be resisted if they threaten existing hierarchies.

Moral Neutralization and Justification

Another mechanism that sustains unequal systems involves moral justification. Gresham Sykes and David Matza identified techniques of neutralization in 1957 as ways individuals explain behavior that would otherwise conflict with their moral standards (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Although originally applied to delinquency, these same patterns of reasoning can be seen operating within modern business environments.

Over time, these justifications did not remain isolated at the individual level. As economic systems expanded and corporate structures became more dominant, the same forms of reasoning became embedded in institutional behavior. What begins as a way for individuals to excuse their actions becomes normalized as standard business thinking and is passed forward as accepted practice.

In the business context, denial of responsibility is most often expressed through appeals to market forces. Decisions that directly affect people—layoffs, wage suppression, lack of training, or unstable employment—are framed as unavoidable outcomes of competition rather than choices made by individuals or organizations. Responsibility is shifted to the abstract concept of "the market," removing accountability from those making the decisions.

Denial of injury appears in the minimization of harm. Workers who lose jobs or face instability are told they will find something else, that everyone goes through it, or that the situation is temporary. In gig and temporary labor markets, instability is reframed as voluntary. Even when harm is visible, it is often redirected back onto the worker, who is blamed for not adapting to conditions created by the system itself.

Condemnation of the condemners occurs when those affected by these conditions are redefined as the problem. Long-term employees become "not a good fit," demotions are framed as opportunities, and those who leave deteriorating conditions are said to have chosen their outcome. Structural decisions are recast as personal shortcomings, shifting attention away from the system and onto the individual.

Appeal to higher loyalties is expressed through the language of necessity. Harmful decisions are justified as required by "the demands of the marketplace" or dismissed with the phrase "it's not personal, it's just business." In this framing, the well-being of individuals is subordinated to the perceived needs of the system.

Taken together, these mechanisms do more than allow individuals and institutions to justify harmful decisions. They actively protect the structure that produces those decisions. By shifting responsibility to the market, minimizing harm, redefining those affected as the problem, and appealing to the supposed necessities of business, accountability is removed at every level. The result is not a series of isolated outcomes, but a consistent pattern: a system that produces instability, insecurity, and economic inequity while continually explaining those outcomes away. In this way, neutralization does not merely excuse the system—it helps sustain it.

Coercion and the Reproduction of Social Behavior

Mark Colvin's theory of coercion adds another dimension to the discussion. Colvin argued that environments characterized by coercion—whether stable or inconsistent—can reproduce behavioral patterns that reinforce dominance, aggression, and hierarchy (Colvin, 2000).

Individuals raised or operating within coercive environments often internalize those same patterns of control and domination. Over time, these behaviors can become embedded within institutions, workplaces, and social relationships.

This process can perpetuate cycles of inequality and conflict across generations.

Charismatic Authority and Political Subcultures

Periods of structural strain frequently produce charismatic leadership movements. Sociologist Max Weber described charismatic authority as a form of legitimacy grounded in personal loyalty rather than institutional structures (Weber, 1922).

Charismatic leaders often emerge during moments of uncertainty, when existing institutions appear ineffective or unresponsive. Followers may perceive such leaders as uniquely capable of representing the identity or grievances of a particular group.

In these circumstances, loyalty to the leader may become intertwined with group identity itself, reinforcing subcultural cohesion and intensifying political polarization.

Status Anxiety and Social Tension

Status consciousness plays a powerful role in stratified societies. Individuals at the top of the social hierarchy may resist reforms out of fear that their relative position will decline. At the same time, individuals excluded from elite status may experience frustration or resentment toward systems perceived as unfair.

This dual dynamic—status protection above and status frustration below—creates a persistent source of tension within modern societies.

Thorstein Veblen's analysis of status signaling and conspicuous consumption demonstrated how economic elites often reinforce social hierarchy through visible displays of wealth and prestige (Veblen, 1899). Such displays can intensify awareness of inequality throughout society.

The Limits of Individual Merit Narratives

Modern economic narratives often emphasize personal merit as the primary driver of success. However, structural analysis suggests that success cannot be understood solely in terms of individual effort.

Individuals possess different talents and abilities, and societies reward some skills more heavily than others. Systems that disproportionately reward financial accumulation may undervalue other forms of contribution, including intellectual, artistic, or civic work.

As a result, individuals whose talents lie outside dominant economic pathways may find themselves marginalized despite contributing meaningfully to society.

Conclusion

What this synthesis ultimately reveals is that extreme economic inequity is not simply the result of individual failure or poor personal choices. It is the predictable outcome of a system that loudly promotes wealth and status as the goals of life while refusing to take responsibility for how those goals are actually achieved. Society celebrates those who reach the top but offers little guidance, protection, or fairness in the paths available to get there. Individuals are told to succeed, left largely on their own to figure out how, and then judged harshly when they fail or punished if they break the rules in the attempt. In this environment the winners are praised as proof that the system works, while the many who fall behind are blamed for their own circumstances. The sociological theories examined here make clear that this outcome is not accidental. When success is glorified but the structure of opportunity is ignored, the system does exactly what we see today: it concentrates wealth and status at the top while leaving the majority to compete in a game whose rules were never designed for them to win.

Across the world, the majority of people do not achieve the socially accepted markers of success. Even within the United States, a country often assumed to be broadly prosperous, only a small fraction of the population reaches the levels of wealth and status that define success in public imagination. Lists that celebrate a few hundred top earners or wealth holders exist precisely because those outcomes are so rare. When a nation of hundreds of millions can point to only a small number of individuals as clear "winners," the implication is unavoidable: the vast majority do not reach those goals. If achieving those goals were common, they would not be so widely celebrated in media; their constant visibility reflects their rarity, not their accessibility. When success through legitimate means becomes rare enough to be treated as exceptional, the problem is no longer individual—it is structural. The continued belief that failure is primarily personal rather than systemic is not a misunderstanding; it is the condition that allows the system to continue operating as it does.

Even basic economic measures reinforce this pattern. Median incomes in the United States have not kept pace with the rising costs of housing, healthcare, and education, placing sustained pressure on large portions of the population. At the same time, wealth has become increasingly concentrated, with a relatively small percentage of individuals holding a disproportionate share of total assets. These trends are well documented across multiple studies and over several decades. The result is a widening gap between the outcomes society promotes and the conditions most people actually experience. In this context, the idea that success is broadly accessible through effort alone becomes difficult to sustain.

This analysis is not directed at any single economic system in theory, but at the outcomes produced by systems as they are actually practiced. If an economic structure consistently generates these patterns—concentrated wealth, unstable opportunity, and the normalization of harm—then the structure itself must be examined. Labels alone do not resolve the problem. What matters is whether the system, in practice, distributes opportunity in a way that is sustainable, stable, and broadly accessible. If it does not, then it is not enough to defend it. It must be questioned.

History shows that systems built this way do not remain stable indefinitely; they either reform themselves, or they eventually face consequences they can no longer control.

References

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty.* Crown.

Cohen, A. K. (1955). *Delinquent boys: The culture of the gang.* Free Press.

Colvin, M. (2000). *Crime and coercion: An integrated theory of chronic criminality.* St. Martin's Press.

Hirschman, A. O. (1991). *The rhetoric of reaction: Perversity, futility, jeopardy.* Harvard University Press.

Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review, 3*(5), 672–682.

Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review, 22*(6), 664–670.

Veblen, T. (1899). *The theory of the leisure class.* Macmillan.

Weber, M. (1922). *Economy and society.* University of California Press.