

# INEQUALITY IN AMERICA: THE CASE FOR POST-INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

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## ABSTRACT

*Post-industrial theorists suggest that the increased use of theoretical knowledge and information technology are among the most important developments in contemporary societies. This chapter introduces the concept of post-industrial capitalism to illustrate how knowledge and information influence inequality in the contemporary United States. The concept refers to a phase in capitalist development where the exploitation of knowledge and information are increasingly used to advance opportunities for profit and political advantage. Several case studies related to politics and the economy show that elites benefit from new waves of technology for three principal reasons: because they have the capital to acquire effective technologies, because they have organizational access to implement them across multiple institutions in a manner consistent with their interests, and because they have the degrees of freedom to reduce the risks that inevitably accompany technological innovations. These case studies additionally highlight the role of technological innovations in providing elites not only with the critical resources necessary to effectively shift the social contract with labor in the United States but to do so in a manner which minimizes the reactions of both unions and politicians.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Various authors have recommended incorporating developments in post-industrial technology into stratification analysis. Wright and Martin (1987: 1–2), for example, note that post-industrial technology not only has begun “a fundamental transformation of the technical basis of production” but additionally has started to change “social and economic structures” resulting in macro level shifts of “class structures . . . from industrial to postindustrial society”. They conclude by suggesting that social change analysis must theorize these recent technological innovations or run the risk of omitting factors critical to influencing class structure (Wright & Martin, 1987; Walton, 1987; Stehr, 1994).

This chapter discusses the role of post-industrial technology as it relates to recent developments in politics and the economy. This focus on technology attempts neither to displace various stratification theories nor advance a technologically deterministic perspective. Technology is not about interests but about the resources used to implement interests. But technological resources vary in their accessibility, in their effectiveness, and their consequences. My argument is that post-industrial technology provides new options and new outcomes to actors which account in part for some recent and important trends in income inequality.

## TECHNOLOGY IN POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

To conceptualize recent technological developments, I follow Bell’s (1976) contention of a qualitative increase in the following categories: (1) actors in service industries and professional occupations; (2) resources related to intellectual technology and theoretical knowledge; (3) advances in material culture related to information technology. Like Wright and Martin (1987), Bell’s definition is broad and goes beyond material culture or computer technology and points to the content of change (knowledge and information), its actual agents (professionals and services) as well as to the material technology used in part to implement it (computers and telecommunications).

In the past, post-industrialization has been seen as antithetical to stratification theory in general and Marxism in particular (Walton, 1987). Marxists emphasized exploitation as related to private property and free market exchange; post-industrialists emphasized the consequences of technological innovation for occupational specialization and industrial differentiation. But as Wright and Martin (1987) correctly suggest, a synthesis of Marxist and post-industrial theory is overdue. A synthesis would remedy the omissions in each

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