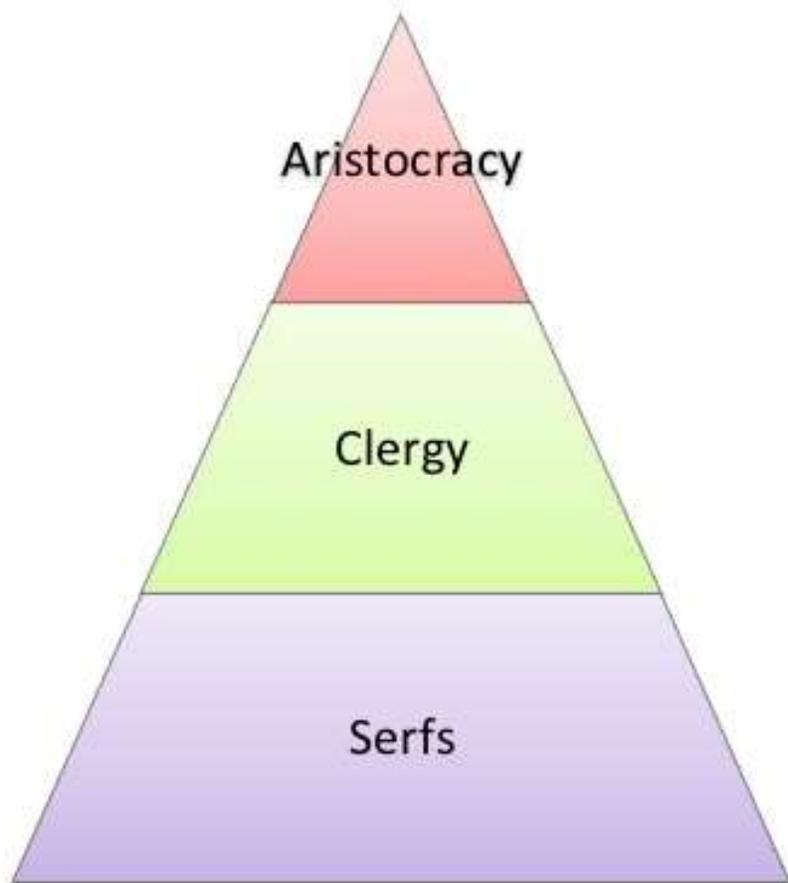


ESTATE SYSTEM

- The term '**Estates**' represents a type of stratification that existed in Europe during the Middle Ages. Estates system has a long history. The system emerged in the ancient Roman Empire, and existed in Europe until very recent times.
- The estates system consisted of three main divisions—the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners or the ordinary people. In England and France, for example, these three divisions were found. In some parts of Europe, for example, Sweden, almost upto 1866 there were four estate divisions; Nobles, Clergy, Citizens and Peasants.

- Estate systems are characterized by control of land and were common in Europe and Asia during the Middle Ages and into the 1800s.
- In these systems, two major estates existed: the landed gentry or nobility and the peasantry or serfs.
- The landed gentry owned huge expanses of land on which serfs toiled. The serfs had more freedom than slaves had but typically lived in poverty and were subject to arbitrary control by the nobility

Estate Systems



- Characterizes the status hierarchies found in Europe prior to capitalism.
- Membership in the Church (clergy) was not based on ascribed characteristics.
- However, highest rankings within clergy come from first estate (aristocracy).
- Like the caste system, position in an estate system is determined at birth. Contact is permitted, but generally impersonal.

- Estate systems thrived in Europe until the French Revolution in 1789 violently overturned the existing order and inspired people in other nations with its cries for freedom and equality.
- As time went on, European estate systems slowly gave way to class systems of stratification (discussed a little later).
- After the American colonies won their independence from Britain, the South had at least one characteristic of an estate system, the control of large plots of land by a relatively few wealthy individuals and their families, but it obviously used slaves rather than serfs to work the land.

- Much of Asia, especially China and Japan, also had estate systems. For centuries, China's large population lived as peasants in abject conditions and frequently engaged in peasant uprisings.
- These escalated starting in the 1850s after the Chinese government raised taxes and charged peasants higher rents for the land on which they worked.
- After many more decades of political and economic strife, Communists took control of China in 1949

- **Nobility**

- Members of the **nobility** had great inherited wealth and did little or no discernible work. They occupied themselves in what we would term leisure pursuits, such as hunting or riding. Others cultivated interests in cultural pursuits, such as art and music.
- To ensure that their inherited wealth passed smoothly from one generation to the next without being dispersed to members of the extended family, the nobility of the Middle Ages practiced the law of primogeniture.
- The word **primogeniture** comes from Latin and means “first born.” The nobility’s law of primogeniture stipulated that only a first-born son could inherit his father’s wealth.
- Members of this stratum developed an ideology to justify their privileged positions, the **divine right of kings**, which posited that the authority of the king comes directly from God.
- The king delegated authority to the nobles. Because the king and the nobles were God’s representatives, they had to be obeyed.

- **Clergy**

- The eldest son was guaranteed a healthy income upon the death of his father, but other sons had to find their own means of income.
- Few, if any, were trained for work, so many became members of the Roman Catholic **clergy**, a body of religious officials.
- The clergy was very powerful in European society in the Middle Ages, and membership offered long-term job security and a comfortable living.
- The higher up the ladder a priest went, the more power he had over the masses.

- **Commoners**

- The third tier of the estate system consisted of the masses of people known as the **commoners**. They spent their lives engaged in hard physical labor, with virtually no chance of moving up in society.

CHARACTERISTICS

A/C T B BOTTOMORE

1. LEGAL BASIS
2. DIVISION OF LABOUR
3. POLITICAL GROUP

- **1. Legal Basis of Estates:**

- Estates were legally defined. Each estate had a 'status' of its own. More precisely in a legal sense the status was associated with rights and duties, privileges and obligations. As it has been said, "To know a person's real position "it was first of all necessary to know" the law by which he lived".
- In comparison with the first two estates—the clergy and nobility—the third estate consisting of the serfs or commoners suffered from many legal disabilities. For example, the serfs had the inability to appeal to the king for justice. They had no rights over their chattels or properties and holdings.
- They had the liability of paying the fines of 'merchet' and 'heriot'. (i.e., a fine paid to a lord for the marriage of a daughter, and a fine paid to the lord on the death of a tenant). Even different penalties were imposed on them for similar offences.

- **2. Estates Representing Division of Labour:**

- The estates represented a broad division of labour. They had some definite functions.
- According to the law of the day, the nobility were to fight and defend all, the clergy were to pray and the commoners were to pay or provide food for all.

- **3. Estates as Political Groups:**

- The feudal estates were political groups. An assembly of estates possessed political power. From this point of view the serfs did not constitute an estate until the 12th Century A.D.
- The decline of Education feudalism after the 12th Century is associated with the rise of a third estate. The third estate behaved for a long period within the feudal system as a distinctive group before they overthrew it.
- Thus the three estates—clergy, nobility and the commoners functioned like three political groups. As far as participation in government was concerned, the clergy used to stand by the nobility. In France, the political position was more rigid.
- This system of three estates remained there until 1789, that is, till the outbreak of the Revolution. In the French Parliament called 'States – General', these estates used to sit separately and not together. That differentiation within the estates prevailed for a long time. The political movement of the French Revolution brought about some radical changes in France.

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