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Chapter Eight: Stratification and Inequality
Professor Andrew Beveridge

On Sunday morning of Labor Day weekend 2005, nearly two million copies of the New York Times were delivered to doorsteps around the country. Hurricane Katrina had on August 31st inflicted catastrophic damage on the central Gulf Coast, most notably by causing extensive flooding in New Orleans, Louisiana, and reporters like Jason DeParle were just beginning to make sense of the tragedy.

“What a shocked world saw exposed in New Orleans last week wasn’t just a broken levee. It was a cleavage of race and class, at once familiar and startlingly new, laid bare in a setting where they suddenly amounted to matters of life and death. Hydrology joined sociology throughout the story line, from the settling of the flood-prone city, where well-to-do white people lived on the high ground, to its frantic abandonment. No one was immune, of course. With 80 percent of the city under water, tragedy swallowed the privilege and poor, and traveled spread across racial lines. But the divides in the city were evident in things as simple as access to a car. The 35 percent of black households that didn’t have one, compared with just 15 percent among whites.” (DeParle, 2005).

On the same day, reporters were also grappling with inequality closer to home. With race and class debates already stirred into a frenzy by the hurricane, Sam Roberts broke news of rising inequality in Manhattan, home to the New York Times headquarters and over 1.6 million of the richest and poorest residents in America living side by side.

“Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue is only about 60 blocks from the Wagner Houses in East Harlem, but they might as well be light years apart. They epitomize the highest- and lowest-earning census tracts in Manhattan, where the disparity between rich and poor is now greater than in any other county in the country. That finding, in an analysis conducted for The New York Times, dovetails with other new regional economic research...The top fifth of earners in Manhattan now make 52 times what the lowest fifth make -- \$365,826 compared with \$7,047 -- which is roughly comparable to the income disparity in Namibia...Put another way, for every dollar made by households in the top fifth of Manhattan earners, households in the bottom fifth made about 2 cents” (Roberts, 2005).

Much of what we read in newspapers consists of statistics—that 35% of black households in New Orleans didn’t have a car compared to just 15% of white households, that the top 20% of incomes in New York City average \$365,826 compared to only \$7,047 for the bottom fifth. These statistics reveal important patterns about race and class in America and help us understand how power is concentrated in our society. But where do these statistics come from? Is there somewhere that reporters like Jason DeParle and Sam Roberts can go to find reliable statistics about class and inequality in America?

For the past 13 years, they have gone to Professor Andrew Beveridge, a professor of sociology at Queens College in New York City. Beveridge has a formal partnership with the New York Times to answer these questions and back them up with data. This partnership is a unique example of how a sociologist can help provide information to the public while framing that information in a sociological way. For example, in the days before and after Katrina hit the Gulf

Coast, millions of viewers around the country watched local residents pack the roadways in an effort to escape the storm. Many suspected that those trapped behind lacked access to a car, but who knew for sure? Reporters and news anchors were scrambling to find out the real story. For the answer, they contacted Professor Beveridge. On very short notice, he conducted and delivered a demographic analysis of the New Orleans area using U.S. Census data on car ownership. Within hours had produced the first solid statistics on the issue and helped work with reporters to craft their stories. In addition to using those statistics in articles, the staff at New York Times developed a graphic that helped illustrate to general readers that class inequality may have been what drove some to escape and others to drown.

Harlem lies 1315 miles northeast of New Orleans on the island of Manhattan and houses many of New York's poorest residents living within walking distance of mansions (such as the Duke-Semans townhouse) which sell for up to \$50 million. Manhattan is known to attract some of the most talented and driven professionals from around the world, so it is not surprising that levels of inequality exist in New York City. What's surprising is that those levels have increased dramatically over the past few decades. When Beveridge brought this to the attention of editors at the Times, they assigned reporters to the story immediately. Again using Census data for his analysis, Beveridge showed that as of the year 2000, the top fifth of earners made 52 times what the lowest make in Manhattan. Ten years earlier in 1990, the number for the top fifth was 32 times greater than the bottom fifth. In 1980, the difference was only a factor of 21. Over the past two decades, "the gains are all going to the top," Dr. Beveridge said. "It's a massive class disparity" (Roberts, 2005).

Professor Beveridge uses his role as a public sociologist to help the general public understand tough issues like class in America. Americans can (and often do) change their class positions over time, which makes class a difficult thing to understand. For example, although we know that money matters in America, it's hard to draw lines that separate one class from another. This has led many academics to conclude that class distinctions do not exist in the U.S. like they do in other places. Beveridge has no patience for these dismissals. "People can talk about class all they want, but it's not until you see Katrina and these Manhattan statistics that you start to really understand what it's like to be left behind in America." Far from diminishing, "class has actually become more and more important" over the past three decades.

By emphasizing not only income but education, prestige, and wealth, Beveridge helps bring a sociological understanding to class analysis. He takes his partnership with the Times very seriously, viewing it as a way to bridge a gap between science and public understanding. That's why Beveridge was asked to join high-level editorial meetings to plan out a ten-part series on "Class in America" during the summer of 2005. That's why Beveridge has been asked repeatedly to testify in court as an expert witness in neighborhood and community disputes. That's why by 2005 Beveridge had authored over 50 articles for GothamGazette.com, a non-profit Web site about the issues facing New York City, and contributed analyses for over 40 New York Times articles over the past decade. By selecting and analyzing data he considers important to society, Beveridge not only influences newsmakers but helps to create the news itself.