

ownership over another, such that the former take upon themselves ‘the right to use, abuse and take the fruits of the latter’s labour’. The slave, therefore, is the:

- **Property** of their owner. Slave systems arguably reached their height in Europe and the USA between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when the capture and shipment of slaves from Africa (in particular) took on a global dimension. Perhaps the most familiar example of a slave-based modern society is that of the US southern states in the nineteenth century, a tightly regulated system supported by a variety of laws governing the behaviour of the *enslaved* (whether they could marry, where they could live, when and if they could travel and so forth).

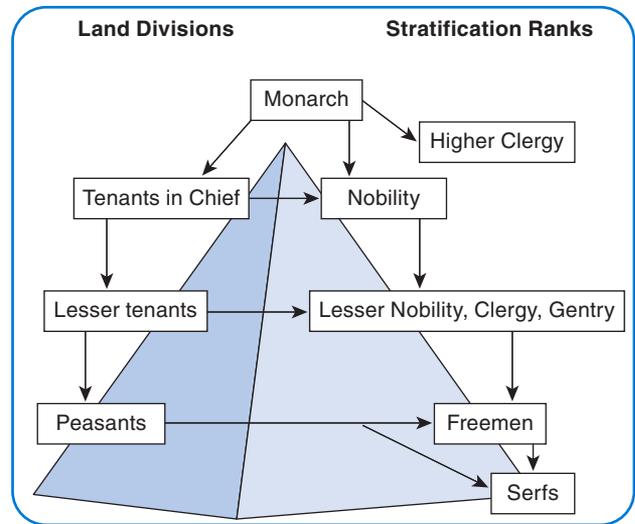
Although opinions differ as to whether slaves can be considered a ‘class’ in the same way that slave owners were a class – **Gingrich** (2002), for example, suggests slaves are a *status group* because, in **Weberian** terms, ‘they have nothing to sell’ and hence have no *market situation* – it’s clear that, in status terms, slaves were always at the very bottom of society, or even outside it. Slave status was also:

Ascribed – children born to slave parents also became slaves. Slaves could, however, be given their freedom by their owners.

The basic belief system (ideology) underpinning slavery, at least in early modern society, was usually one of *biological superiority* – slaves were ‘naturally inferior’ to their owners.

Feudal (estate) systems

Estate systems characterise *pre-modern, pre-industrial, agrarian* (agricultural) societies,



The estates system (feudalism)

such as Britain in the sixteenth century, and are based around:

- **Land ownership:** In agricultural (or *feudal*) societies, where there are no factories or machines to produce goods, farming is the main economic activity, which makes land the single most important commodity. To own land, therefore, is to be powerful, since you control something vital to the lives of thousands, if not millions, of people. Land ownership was not distributed fairly or equally and, in feudal Britain, land could not be *legally owned*; it was considered the property of God and, as such, was held ‘in trust’ by the monarch, as God’s earthly representative. Land was delegated, initially by the monarch, in a:
- **Pyramid structure** of land divisions and stratification ranks.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The feudal (estates) system links into elite theories of the state.

The system was based on a strong structure of *rights and duties*, underpinned by:

- **A religious belief system** that stressed its 'divine nature'. The Church taught that God had created the world in His image and, since God was all-powerful, it was not for mere mortals to question or challenge the social order.
- **Military might**, consolidated in the hands of the nobility and their knight-retainers.
- **Legal sanctions**: different levels in the structure had different legal rights – serfs, for example, although not slaves, were under the control and patronage of their feudal lord, who could impose restrictions on their behaviour: whom they could marry, where they could live and so forth.

Caste systems

The caste system has existed for around 3000 years, mainly in India, where the influence of the *Hindu religion* has been traditionally strong (although, as Kane (2004) notes, variations have appeared in countries such as Brazil). The system involves the division of society into five major caste groups (*varna*), each traditionally associated with a particular form of work. Each major caste is sub-divided into thousands of different sub-castes (*jatis*).

The caste (<i>varna</i>) system	
Major castes	Example caste occupations
Brahmin	Priest, teacher
Kshatriya	Soldier, landowner
Vaishya	Businessman, farmer
Shudra	Manual worker, servant
Harijan ('Untouchables')	Roadsweeper

Conventionally, the caste system is portrayed as a:

Closed system of stratification (no individual movement up or down the class structure), with a couple of exceptions:

- **Sub-castes (*jatis*)** can improve their social status in the hierarchy (they can move up or down within the major caste categories).
- **Individuals** can lose their caste position by breaking caste law (such as marrying outside their caste). When this occurs, they become 'out-caste' – in effect, relegated to the lowest position in the caste hierarchy (*harijan* or, as it was formerly known in the West, 'Untouchable').

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: Caste systems are examples of absolute social mobility.

Ascribed: Caste positions are given at birth, based on parental caste position. Each caste is, therefore, *endogamous* – self-contained and allowing marriage only between members of the same caste.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Families and households: Note the association between religious beliefs (Hinduism) and the concept of the arranged marriage.

The system, although based around *occupational groupings*, is underpinned by a Hindu religious belief system that stresses two important concepts:

- **Reincarnation (*kharma*)** – the belief that once someone dies they are reborn.