

Principles of Sociology

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Stratification, Social Class and Inequalities

Social Stratification

- Social stratification represents the structured inequality between individuals and social groups.
- In stratified social systems, people find themselves in asymmetrical relations and possess statuses in a hierarchical structure.
- Inequality refers to differential (unequal) access to physical, social, economic resources and power.
- The unequal access to resources is defined by individuals position in hierarchical structure of social system.
- Societies can be seen as consisting of 'strata', layers in a hierarchy, with the more favoured at the top and the less privileged nearer the bottom.
- Social arrangements and institutions systematically distribute benefits and burdens unequally among different categories of people.

- Social stratification differs from social differentiation.
- Social differentiation refers to the division of functions and labor contributed to greater social efficiency.
- The division of social functions and labor purports to meet social needs and problems in terms of greater social efficiency.
- In all societies, different people typically perform different tasks and, as a result, occupy different statuses.
- The differentiation of statuses and social roles (duties and rights) are not always ranked with respect to one another.
- Social differentiation creates a necessary condition for social ranking, but it does not create the ranking itself. Whenever we find social stratification, we find social differentiation, but not the other way around.

Systems of Stratification

- **1) Slavery**

- Slavery is an extreme form of inequality, in which certain people are owned as property by others.
- Slave-labor systems broke down, because of a) social struggles, b) its economic inefficiency, and c) its moral condemnation.
- Modern forms of slavery (enslaved brick-makers in Pakistan, sex slaves in Thailand, domestic slaves in Europe).

- **2) Caste**

- In caste social systems, the social-class position of an individual is ascribed at birth and is defined by personal (race, ethnicity), physical (skin color), and kinship (family caste, parents' religion) characteristics.
- We found caste societies in rural India, South Africa (apartheid-The White rule), Europe (Jews as a separate caste).
- The boundaries of each caste are protected through restrictions of intimate contact, intermarrying, interacting, and through socio-spatial segregation.

● **3) Estates**

- The feudal system was articulated on the relations between estates, namely social categories, strata with differing obligations and rights towards each other, some of these differences being established in law.
- In European feudalism, there were three estates: a) *aristocracy* and gentry, b) *clergy*, c) *commoners* (*serfs, free peasants, merchants* and artisans).
- In medieval European feudal system, estates were organized as a stratification system on local ground. In more centralized traditional empires (China, Japan,) they were organized on a more national basis.

● **4) Class**

- A social class is a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which influence the life chances and lifestyle of individuals.
- The basic pillars of class differentiation are the ownership of wealth, means of production and occupation.
- Classes differ from other forms of stratification in four main respects:
 - a) Class systems are fluid
 - b) Class positions are in some part achieved
 - c) Class is an economically based category
 - d) Class systems are large-scale and impersonal types of stratification.

Stratification and social class: Perspectives and theories

● **Functionalist and Conflict perspective on stratification**

● **The Functionalist Theory of Stratification**

- To Functionalists, social stratification consists of a functional requirement for all societies.
- All societies require a system of stratification in order to staff all the statuses composing the social structure and to motivate individuals to perform the duties associated with these positions.
- Society must provide differential rewards to its members, according to their positions in social structure. Each social position/status and its role is associated with different rewards.

● **The Conflict Theory of Stratification**

- Conflict theorists argue that stratification benefits individuals and groups who have the power to dominate and exploit others.
- Viewed from the conflict perspective, society is an arena in which people struggle for privilege, prestige, and power, and advantaged groups enforce their advantage through coercion.

● **Marxian theory of class**

- For Karl Marx, a social class is a group of people who stand in a common relationship to the means of production.
- The relationship between classes is an exploitative one.
- In feudal societies exploitation often took the form of the direct transfer of produce from the peasantry to the aristocracy.
- The basic class distinction referred to the historical existence of two main classes consisted of those who owned the land (aristocrats, gentry or slave-holders) and those actively engaged in producing from it (serfs, slaves and free peasantry).
- In capitalist societies, social stratification represents the division between those who own and control the means of production (factories, offices, machinery and the wealth or capital) and those who have only their labor to sell.
- The oppressing capitalist class or bourgeoisie and the oppressed working class or proletariat consist of the two main socio-economic categories of modern social stratification.
- The exploitative relation between these two classes is founded on the fact that the wealth that labor of working people creates is appropriated, and accumulated, by the owners of capital.

- **Points of critique to Marxian approach**

- **A)** Capitalist society is not split only into two main social categories (capitalists and workers), but various divisions (skilled and unskilled workers, man and woman, native and foreigners e.tc) play a crucial part in creating competition and social conflicts.
- **B)** Marx's forecast of a communist revolution led by the industrial working class in the advanced societies was historically disproved, as a large part of the working class seems to assert its stake in the capitalist system.
- **C)** The base of common experiences of the working people does not necessarily function as the ground for the development of class consciousness.

- **M. Weber's theory of Social Stratification**

- Weber developed a more complex, multidimensional view of social stratification, by recognizing the crucial role of *class* (economic standing), *status* (prestige) and *party* (power).
- Weber refused the bipolar Marxian model of stratification and contented that these three (class, status, party) overlapping elements of stratification produce an enormous number of possible positions within society.

- **Economic standing**

- The economic dimension of stratification consists of wealth and income.
- *Wealth* has to do with what people own at a particular point in time.
- **Income** refers to the amount of new money people receive within a given time interval.
- The ownership, control or the lack of control of means of production is not the only factor that defines individuals' class positions.
- Class divisions have also to do with individual's market position.
- Market position is defined by the skills and credentials, or qualifications, which affect the types of work people are able to obtain.
- Market position largely predestines the individuals life chances.

● **Status**

- Status refers to differences between social groups in the social honour or prestige.
- Prestige involves the social respect, admiration, and recognition associated with a particular social status.
- In traditional societies, status was often determined on the basis of the firsthand knowledge of a person gained through multiple interactions in different contexts over a period of years.
- In modern, complex societies, status came to be expressed through people's *styles of life*.
- *Housing, dress, patterns of consumption and leisure time, types of holidays*, manner of speech and occupation, all can function as symbols and markers of social status/prestige.

● **Party/Power**

- Power refers to the ability of individuals and groups to realize their will in human affairs even if it involves the resistance of others.
- Party defines a group of individuals who work together because they have common backgrounds, aims or interests.
- In modern societies, party formation is an important aspect of *power, that can influence stratification* independently of class and status.
- Parties may pursue goals and ideals that cut across class differences.

**E. O. Wright: A Neo-marxist
theory of class**

● Erik Olin Wright

- Wright's theory of class draws on both Marx and Weber.
- In modern capitalism, there are three dimensions of *control over economic resources* and these allow us to identify the major classes that exist:
 - 1) control over investments or money capital
 - 2) control over the physical means of production (land, factories, offices)
 - 3) control over labor power.
- These three types of control define the main class positions in our modern capitalist societies.
- The two main classes consist of those who have control over each of these dimensions in the production system (capitalist class) and the working class who have control over none of them.
- In between these two main classes are the *contradictory class locations*.
- *People who are in contradictory class locations they are able to influence some aspects of production, but are denied control over others.*

**J. Goldthorpe: A neo-weberian
theory of stratification**

- Goldthorpe's class scheme identifies class positions on the basis of two factors: a) *market situation* and b) *work situation*.
- An individual's market situation refers to his or her level of job security and prospects for advancement.
- The work situation describes the degree of control, power and authority within the occupation.
- Goldthorpe evaluated occupations on the basis of their relative market and work situations.
- Goldthorpe's occupational scheme has been established on European level and has been used widely in empirical research.
- It has been useful in highlighting class-based inequalities, such as those related to health and education, as well as reflecting class-based dimensions in voting patterns, political outlooks and general social attitudes.

- In his more recent writings, Goldthorpe (2000) has emphasized employment relations by focusing on different types of employment contract.
- He proceeded to a distinction between “labor contract” and “service contract”.
- A labor contract refers to a defined relation between wages and work effort.
- A service contract is characterized by a 'prospective' element, such as the possibility of salary growth or promotion.
- The working class is characterized by *labour contracts*, the service class by *service contracts*, and the intermediate class positions experience intermediate types of employment relations.

- **Points of critique to Goldthorpe's theory**
- a) Occupational class schemes cannot include the *economically inactive and evaluate their social status and experience.*
- b) Class schemes based on occupational distinctions are also unable to reflect the importance of property-ownership and wealth.

Sociological Research:

**Identifying class and analysing
stratification system**

- **The Objective Method**

- The objective method views social class as a statistical category.
- People are assigned to social classes on the basis of income, occupation, or education (or some combination of these characteristics).
- The objective method provides a statistical measure for investigating various correlates of class, such as life expectancy, mental illness, divorce, political attitudes, crime rates, and leisure activities.
- Its limitations have to do with the fact that it is not only the actual income, education, or occupational categories that matter but also the meanings and definitions others assign to these qualities.

- **The Self-Placement/Subjective Method**

- The self-placement method invites people to identify the social class to which they think they belong.
- Class is viewed as a social category, one in which people group themselves with others they perceive as sharing certain attributes in common.
- Method's limitation refers to that people's identification with a particular class category is often influenced by their aspirations rather than their current situation.

- **The Reputational Method**

- In the reputational method, people are asked how they classify other individuals.
- This approach views class as a social group, one in which people share a feeling of oneness and are bound together in relatively stable patterns of interaction.
- Class rests on the knowledge of who associates with whom.
- This method is particularly useful in predicting associational patterns among people, but it is difficult to use in large samples where people have little or no knowledge of one another.

Stratification and Lifestyle

● **Stratification and lifestyle**

- In analyzing class location, sociologists have traditionally relied on conventional indicators of class location such as market position, relations to the means of production and occupation.
- Stratification within classes, as well as between classes, depends not only on occupational differences but also on differences in consumption and lifestyle.
- Cultural factors, such as lifestyle and consumption patterns, must be taken into account in order to identify individuals' class location.
- In contemporary, capitalist, consumerist western societies, lifestyle choices and practices of consumption are crucial class indicators and components of individuals' identities.
- Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) identifies four forms of 'capital' that characterize class position.
- *Economic capital*
- *Cultural capital*: education, appreciation of the arts, consumption and leisure pursuits.
- *Social capital*: one's networks of friends and contacts.
- *Symbolic capital*: possession of a good reputation/ social status.

Stratification and Gender

● **Stratification and gender**

- Even though gender is a crucial dimension of social stratification, for a long time sociological research on stratification was 'gender-blind'.
- This blindness dissolved due to feminist critiques and women's important economic role in many Western societies.
- Waddoups and Assane (1993) found that having a child dampens the upward mobility of women but not of men.
- For females, education is clearly the most significant factor related to status attainment.
- Gender stereotypes and family background define largely women's educational and occupational orientation and achievements.

- The 'conventional position' in class analysis was that the paid work of women is relatively insignificant compared to that of men.
- Since the majority of women have traditionally been in a position of economic dependence on their husbands, it follows that their class position is most often identified with their husband's class situation.
- **Critique to “conventional position”**
- 1) The income of women is essential to maintaining the family's economic position and mode of life.
- 2) Wife's occupation may sometimes set the standard of the class position of the household.
- 3) For some reasons, the class position of women may differ from that of men within some 'cross-class' households.
- 4) The proportion of households in which women are the sole breadwinners is increasing.

Social Mobility

- The term social mobility refers to the movement of individuals and social groups between different socio-economic positions.
- Social mobility can occur because:
 - a) Societies change, altering the division of labor, introducing new positions, undermining old ones, and shifting the allocation of resources.
 - b) Sometimes individuals who belong to the lower strata resent their exclusion from higher ranks and work to change the established social order.
 - c) Social mobility can take place when shifts occur in the availability of different types of talent.
- **Two types of social mobility:**
 - 1) *Vertical mobility* means movement *up* or *down* the socio-economic scale.
 - 2) *Horizontal mobility* entails movement from one social status to another of approximately equivalent rank.

- **Methods of studying social mobility:**
- a) **intragenerational mobility:** a comparison of the social status of a person over an extended time.
- b) **intergenerational mobility:** a comparison of the social status of parents and their children at some point in their respective careers.

- **Stratification systems of differential degree of social mobility:**
- ***Open systems:*** Social arrangements that permit people to change their status with relative ease
- ***Closed systems:*** Social arrangements that impede people's transition to an other status.
- No societies are entirely open or entirely closed.

- **The example of “American dream”**
- The American dream describes a society in which all people can alter and improve their lot.
- The democratic belief system promote the ideal that all people should have an equal *opportunity to ascend to the heights of the class system*.
- According to U.S. cultural beliefs, the rewards of social life flow to people in accordance with their merit and competence and in proportion to the contribution they make to their community and society.
- These beliefs support people’s expectations for getting ahead and achieving a better standard of living than their parents.
- In practice, however, the ideal is not fully realized, and the optimism is not fully justified. Though the American system was founded on the ideal of achievement, ascribed statuses based on race, gender, age, and other social dimensions still have an important influence on people’s chances of success.

Trends of change in class system

● **Changes in social classes**

● *The upper class*

- Wealth is indeed concentrated in the hands of a small minority. Ownership of stocks and bonds is more unequal.
- In Britain, the top 1 per cent own some 21 per cent of marketable wealth.
- The Helsinki (UNU -WIDER 2007) survey found that the richest 2 per cent of the global population own more than half of global household wealth. It also found that while the richest 10 per cent of adults owned 85 per cent of global wealth, the bottom 50 per cent owned just 1 per cent.
- 'The rich' do not constitute a homogeneous group. Some rich people were born into families of 'old money' and others affluent individuals are 'self-made'. Next to them are music and film celebrities, athletes and representatives of the 'new elite' whose wealth comes from the development and promotion of computers, telecommunications and the Internet.
- According to John Scott (1991) the core of the upper class consists of senior executives, finance capitalists and old-style industrial entrepreneurs.

- ***The middle class(-es)***
- The 'middle class' covers a wide range of social groupings who working in many different occupations (service industry, school teachers, medical professionals).
- Members of the middle class usually possess special educational credentials or/and technical qualifications, and so they occupy positions that provide them with greater material and cultural *advantages than those enjoyed by* manual workers.
- The diversity of individuals and their interests deter middle class internal cohesion.
- Professional, managerial and administrative occupations *have been proliferated in contemporary economy and its occupants belong to* the middle class.

- *The working class*
- The proportion of the working population that have blue-collar work is constantly falling.
- The income of manual workers has increased considerably since the turn of the century. This rising standard of living is expressed in the increased availability of consumer goods to all classes.
- The *embourgeoisement thesis*: the process through which blue-collar workers became 'bourgeois' or middle class, namely they adopted middle-class values, political outlooks and lifestyles.
- The traditional working-class communities have tended to become fragmented, or have broken down altogether, with the decline of manufacturing industry and the impact of consumerism.

- *The “Underclass”*

- The term 'underclass' is often used to describe the segment of the population located at the very bottom of the class structure.
- As members of the underclass are characterized those:
 - a) whose living standards that are significantly low
 - b) who confront with multiple disadvantages
 - c) who are among the long-term unemployed
 - d) who are homeless, or have no permanent place in which to live.
 - e) who are depended largely on state welfare benefits.
- The term 'underclass' is a contested one at the centre of a furious sociological debate.
- The term *underclass* has come to reflect the stereotype that the poor have created their own plight and that the inhabitants of inner-city neighborhoods are both fundamentally different from other Americans and violently dangerous.
- We have to do with the return of the 'culture of poverty' thesis, according to which people become dependent on welfare handouts and then have little incentive to find jobs, build solid communities or make stable marriages

Challenges to sociological analytical category of “class”

- **Challenges to sociological analytical category of “class”**

- R. Pahl, J. Pakulski and M. Waters have been prominent amongst those who argue that class is no longer the key to understanding contemporary societies.

- ***The death of class* [1996, J. Pakulski and M. Waters]**

- **a)** Class is no longer an important factor in a person's identity. Differences between social groups are expressed through lifestyle and consumption patterns. Political and social behaviour do not have any more its roots in class position.

- **b)** Less restrictions on property-ownership.

- **c)** Increase in consumer power. Contemporary societies are stratified, but this stratification is achieved through cultural consumption, not class position in the division of labor.

- **d)** Stratification and inequality still exist. but they do so more on a global than a national basis: we see more significant inequalities between different nations than we do within a nation-state.

- The rapid economic transformations occurring in industrial societies have made the measurement of class even more problematic, and have even led some to question the usefulness of class as a concept.
- There is a general shift away from industrial production towards service and knowledge work, and an enormous number of women have entered the workforce in recent decades.
- Occupational class schemes are not necessarily well suited to capturing the dynamic processes of class-formation, mobility and change that are provoked by such social transformations.
- Social class continues to exert a great influence on our lives, and class membership is correlated with a variety of inequalities from life expectancy and overall physical health to access to education and well-paid jobs.

● Bibliography

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