THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract
The forces of social stratification and social problems have long been relegated to the sociological sidelines by class theorists of both Marxist and non-Marxist persuasions. In most versions of class-analytic theory, status groups are treated as secondary forms of affiliation, whereas class-based ties are seen as more fundamental and decisive determinants of social and political action. Social stratification as a cause of social problem is typically represented as vestiges of traditional loyalties that will wither away under the rationalizing influence of socialism, industrialism, or modernization. The first step in the intellectual breakdown of the model of stratification as a cause of social problem was the fashioning of a multidimensional approach to stratification. Whereas many class theorists gave theoretical or conceptual priority to the economic dimension of stratification, the early multi dimension approach emphasized that social behavior could be understood only by taking into account all status group memberships (e.g., race, gender) and the complex ways in which they interact with one another and with class outcomes. This paper traces the contours of current, practical explanatory problems in stratification theory showing how it creates social problems and the similarity of issues in apparently diverse approaches, of both Marxist and non-Marxist. There are two related purposes. The first is to show the specific nature of the current crisis, locating particular explanatory failures. The second is to illustrate the more general issue of the way in which the central epistemology of self-conscious social caste behaviours derives from and describes failures in social scientific practice. This is well illustrated in the response to current problems. Both purposes are served by laying bare the procedures by which attempts are made to convert the contradictions inherent in explanatory failures into contradictory features of social experience which could be explained by consistent theories. Contradiction is thus, apparently, removed from its role in specifying the need for theoretical development, to encapsulating the processes by which current social arrangements are reproduced. However, despite initial plausibility, such attempts merely displace explanatory contradictions rather than solve them. The attempts are justified by an explicit or implicit action frame of reference which, though it is central to abstract discussions of the nature of social stratification, is invoked in practical social science only in circumstances of explanatory failure in an unproductive attempt to insulate the theories from the consequences of their failure. Social stratification is a component of productive social science which encompasses the resolution of contradictions in the transformation of theoretical objects and relationships.

Keywords; Social Stratification, Theories, Social Inequalities, Social Differentiation

Introduction

In recent years, criticisms of the class-analytic framework of social stratification being a cause of social problem has escalated, with many scholars arguing that the concept of class is

‘‘ceasing to do any useful work for sociology’’ (Pahl 1989, p. 710). Although such postmodern accounts have taken many forms, most proceed from the assumption that social classes no longer definitively structure lifestyles and life chances and that ‘‘new theories, perhaps more cultural than structural, [are] in order’’ (Davis 1982, p. 585). In accounts of this sort, the labor movement is represented as a fading enterprise rooted in the old conflicts of the workplace and industrial capitalism, whereas new social movements (e.g., environmentalism) are assumed to provide a more appealing call for collective action by virtue of their emphasis on issues of lifestyle, personal identity, and normative change.

This argument has not been subjected to convincing empirical tests and may prove to be premature. However, even if lifestyles and life chances are truly ‘‘decoupling’’ from economic class, this should not be misunderstood as a more general decline in stratification per se. The massive facts of economic, political, and honorific inequality will still be operative even if conventional models of class ultimately are found deficient in characterizing the postmodern condition. As is well known, some forms of inequality have increased in recent years (e.g., income inequality), while others show no signs of disappearing or withering away (e.g., political inequality).

This persistence and in some cases deepening of inequality is coupled with the continuing diffusion of anti-stratification values and a correspondingly heightened sensitivity to all things unequal. As egalitarianism spreads, the postmodern public becomes heavily involved in monitoring and exposing illegitimate (i.e., non-meritocratic) forms of stratification, and even small departures from equality are increasingly viewed as problematic and intolerable (Meyer 1994). Moreover, because stratification systems are deeply institutionalized, there is good reason to anticipate that demands for egalitarian change will outpace actual changes in stratification practices. These dynamics imply that issues of stratification will continue to generate discord and conflict even in the unlikely event of a long-term trend toward diminishing inequality.

Lenski 1966 observed that since the earliest-known writings on the nature of human societies. there has been recognition that social stratification is a central part of all human organization (Lenski 1966). In his *Politics,* in 350 BCE, Aristotle wrote of the natural ranking of free people and slaves. More recently, during the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu wrote of the feudal system of social stratification and its inequities (Zeitlin 1968; Strasser 1976).

By the mid-1800s, the classic sociological theorists such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber began more systematic analyses of system of social stratification using concepts that remain with us to this day. From the root word strata, we can recognize that social stratification refers to a ranking of people or groups of people within a society. But the term was defined by the earliest sociologists as something more than the almost universal inequalities that exist in all but the least complex of societies. Social stratification refers to a system with rather predictable rules behind the ranking of individuals and groups, which theories of social stratification are meant to uncover and understand. The existence of a system of social stratification also implies some form of legitimating of the ranking of people and the unequal distribution of valued goods, services, and prestige. Without belief systems justifying the inequality and unequal ranking, it is unlikely that a stratification system would remain stable over time

.There are social stratification theories from the works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. More than anyone, it was Karl Marx who attempted a more or less comprehensive

theory of social stratification. Along with Engels in 1848, Marx began one of the world's most famous political writings on the subject. In *the Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1(64) wrote that, 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight; a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes".

When Marx was finally about to undertake a more detailed and systematic discussion of class at the end of the third volume of *Capital,* he died (see Dahrendorf 1959:8). Although Marx referred to several different classes or class segments throughout history, he clearly saw the ownership of property as the basis of class divisions. In preindustrial agricultural societies, the primary division was between the landowners or landed aristocracy, and those who owned no land, peasants and serfs. In capitalist industrial societies, the primary division was between the owners of industrial capital and the working class, or proletariat. It was this exclusively economic definition of class-that is, owners versus non-owners-that allowed Marx to conclude that the elimination of private property in any future communist nation would eliminate extensive inequality and even social stratification itself. In strict contrast to a Marxian theory of social stratification are functional theories of social stratification. In tracing the development of functional theory, most historians of social thought draw a direct line from Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, through Durkheim, to modern functional theorists such as Talcott Parsons Gouldner 1970; Giddens 1973; Strasser 1(76).

More than anyone else though, it was Durkheim who established this general perspective, though interestingly he had little to say about social stratification specifically. This is somewhat understandable when considering that Durkheim's holistic perspective focused on how parts and processes within societies work for the good of the whole. Divisions between people within societies were given little recognition. Durkheim, however, did make brief mention of inequalities within societies. He saw two types, what he called external inequality and internal inequality. As he described them in his book *The Division of Labor,* external inequalities are those imposed on the individual by the social circumstances of birth, in other words, ascribed status. It was in mechanical solidarity, or preindustrial societies, that these external inequalities predominated. In industrial society, on the other hand, there was a need for internal inequality:

"All external inequalities compromise organic solidarity" (Durkheim 1964:371)-that is, threaten social order and the proper functioning of the division of labor in industrial societies. Internal inequalities were seen as inequalities based on individual talent, or achieved status. For the proper functioning of the industrial system, Durkheim implied that the people with the proper talents must be allowed to move into positions for which their talents are best suited. What Durkheim anticipated was a meritocracy based on equality of opportunity. Inequality would be there, but he believed an inequality based on merit was needed. Andal though Durkheim's ideas paralleled somewhat those of many modern functionalists, given his overriding concern with solidarity and moral integration in society, his stress was different. The dominance of internal over external inequality, he believed, was most important for the maintenance of social solidarity. If external inequalities were forced on individuals, "constraint alone, more or less violent and more or less direct binds them to their functions; in consequence ,only an imperfect and troubled solidarity is possible" (Lukes 1973: 175). Thus, in contrast to Davis and Moore (1945), Durkheim was more concerned with moral integration

and cooperation than he was with the efficient staffing of "important" positions in industrial society.

Soon after Marx's death, sociologist Max Weber took issue with Marx's one-dimensional view of social stratification in writings often referred to as a debate with Marx's ghost. Weber recognized that humans have always been divided by not only economic ownership but also occupational skills, status, and organizational power or class, status, and power/party (Gerthand Mills 1946: 181-(4). In a sense, Weber recognized two forms of economic divisions under the term class-divisions based on ownership as well as divisions based on occupational skills (orone's relation to the marketplace). Weber then recognized that people could be divided over honor, status, or prestige with respect to a strongly held value system (particularly one based on religion) and political or organizational power. It was this power/party dimension that Weber believed would be increasingly important in modern industrial societies, especially because of the necessity of political and corporate bureaucracies and organizations (such as labor unions), which challenge those in higher ranks in these bureaucracies.

Max Weber's multidimensional view of social stratification became the most accepted perspective among twentieth-century sociologists. Among other things, Weber's more complex view of social stratification allow sociologists to explain the rapidly growing middle class, as more occupations emerged between the owners of capital and the unskilled working class. Equally important, Weber's multidimensional view of social stratification could explain why social stratification and inequality did not go away in twentieth-century societies that called themselves communist. As Weber predicted, when one dimension of social stratification is minimized, such as private ownership of property, another dimension would come to be more important. In communist societies, this was the dimension of power and control over state bureaucracies.

Conceptual Issues

Stratification can be defined in various ways, but most commonly refers to institutionalized inequalities in power, wealth, and status between categories of persons within a single social system (e.g., classes, castes, ethnic groups). Status inequalities between individuals are found everywhere, inequalities based on personal qualities (charisma, economic or social skills, etc.) do not constitute stratification, since they aren't defined by membership in a particular category. So, if in a hunting band the best hunter or the healer/shaman is held in high regard and has preferential access to some resources, this doesn’t represent social stratification. On other hand, all human societies known to date exhibit institutionalized inequalities based on age, and most have gender-based inequalities as well; so by the general definition given above, all known human societies are stratified. But most writers on social stratification are interested in differences between categories of persons other than age-classes or genders

What are Social Problems

Social problems affect every society, great and small. Even in relatively isolated, sparsely populated areas, a group will encounter social problems. Part of this is due to the fact that members of a society living close enough tend to have conflicts. It’s virtually impossible to avoid them, and even people who live together in the same house don’t always get along seamlessly. On the whole though, when social problems are mentioned they tend to refer to the problems that affect people living together in a society.

The list of social problems is huge and not identical from area to area. In the US, some predominant social issues include the growing divide between rich and poor, domestic violence, unemployment, pollution, urban decay, racism and sexism, and many others. Sometimes social issues arise when people hold very different opinions about how to handle certain situations like unplanned pregnancy. While some people might view abortion as the solution to this problem, other members of the society remain strongly opposed to its use. In itself, strong disagreements on how to solve problems create divides in social groups.

Other issues that may be considered social problems aren't that common in the US and other industrialized countries, but they are huge problems in developing ones. The issue of massive poverty, food shortages, lack of basic hygiene, spread of incurable diseases, ethnic cleansing, and lack of education inhibits the development of society. Moreover, these problems are related to each other and it can seem hard to address one without addressing all of them.

It would be easy to assume that a social problem only affects the people whom it directly touches, but this is not the case. Easy spread of disease for instance may tamper with the society at large, and it's easy to see how this has operated in certain areas of Africa. The spread of AIDs for instance has created more social problems because it is costly, it is a danger to all members of society, and it leaves many children without parents. HIV/AIDs aren't a single problem but a complex cause of numerous ones. Similarly, unemployment in America doesn't just affect those unemployed but affects the whole economy.

It's also important to understand that social problems within a society affect its interaction with other societies, which may lead to global problems or issues. How another nation deals with the problems of a developing nation may affect its relationship with that nation and the rest of the world for years to come. Though the United States was a strong supporter of the need to develop a Jewish State in Israel, its support has come at a cost of its relationship with many Arabic nations.

Additionally, countries that allow multiple political parties and free expression of speech have yet another issue when it comes to tackling some of the problems that plague its society. This is diversity of solutions, which may mean that the country cannot commit to a single way to solve an issue, because there are too many ideas operating on how to solve it. Any proposed solution to something that affects society is likely to make some people unhappy, and this discontent can promote discord. On the other hand, in countries where the government operates independently of the people and where free speech or exchange of ideas is discouraged, there may not be enough ideas to solve issues, and governments may persist in trying to solve them in wrongheaded or ineffective ways.

The very nature of social problems suggests that society itself is a problem. No country has perfected a society where all are happy and where no problems exist. Perhaps the individual nature of humans prevents this and as many people state, perfection many not be an achievable goal.

Social Stratification Theory

Toward the end of the twentieth century, many theorists began combining the insights of Marx and Weber for more realistic explanations of social stratification. For example, rather than

accepting Marx's view of the state as simply an institution run by and for the capitalist class to control others, the concept of state autonomy emerged as a means of understanding how political elites are able to control or regulate modern economic systems to prevent the meltdown of capitalism predicted by Marx (Skocpol 1979; Skocpol and Amenta 1(85).

Other theorists began combining dimensions of stratification from Marx and Weber formore sophisticated conceptions of class categories. The most impressive of these attempts has been Erik O. Wright's empirical work (Wright 197Xa, 197Xb, 1997; Wright et al. 1982; Wright and Martin 197X). By following Marx's idea that class must be defined in relation to the productive system in the society (i.e., by one's relation to the means of production), rather than simply occupational status levels, as functionalists suggest, Wright has developed a four-class model. With this four-class model, Wright is able to show the usefulness of both the Marxian and the Weberian views of class. Defining class in relation to the productive system, we have what Wright calls capitalists, managers, workers, and the petty bourgeoisie. Capitalists own the means of production (factories and banks), purchase the labor of others, and control the labor of others. Managers merely control the labor of others for capitalists and sell their labor to capitalists (such as managers of corporations). Workers, of course, have only their labor to sell to capitalists, while the petty bourgeoisie own some small means of production but employ very few or no workers.

Most previous empirical researches in social stratification have been done from the functional perspective. Class positions, or, more accurately, occupational status positions, arc viewed by functionalists as skill and status rankings on a continuum from lowest to highest. Pay, status, and education levels are all assumed to roughly follow this continuum. In other words, functionalists do not consider class divisions, but rather rankings, as on a ladder. However, these previous functional studies have many problems. For one, research shows no simple relation between these occupational grades and income. Another problem is that education level does not predict income very well (Jencks et al. 1972).

Research by Wright (I 978b, 1997) has produced some interesting findings using these new class categories. With national samples of people in the labor force, Wright's research found class position (the four categories described earlier) to be about as good in explaining differences in income between people as are occupational status and education level. It is also interesting that capitalists have higher incomes, even controlling for or eliminating the effects on income from education level, occupational skill age, and job tenure. In other words, being a capitalist, and especially a big capitalist, irrespective of other factors such as education and occupational skill, brings more income (Aldrich and Weiss 1981).

Another recent conceptualization of class has been made by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist who came to be respected in the United States in the 1990s. From a French structuralism tradition, Bourdieu (1993) focused on how meanings people have of the world are shaped or limited by objective structures in the society. In social stratification, Bourdieu argued that economic class positions shape the worldviews of members of distinct class positions. Thus, these class subcultures result in class differences in tastes, lifestyles, and even preferences of values (Bourdieu 1984, 1996). Through differing class subcultures, people of different classes tend to draw lines around their class "in-group" and the "out-group" of people in other class positions. Thus, people in higher-class positions come to define those of lower-class positions as different and perhaps not as capable of fitting into higher positions in the class system. One can say that from this perspective, "people compete about culture and they compete with it" (Jenkins1992: 128). While there are questions about the extent to which these

class subcultures are as important in the American mass culture context, this perspective has contributed to our understanding of how social mobility might be restricted or enhanced by how people in higher class positions (such as teachers with lower-class children) evaluate others in terms of their knowledge of higher culture (DiMaggio 19X2; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985).Despite the wide acceptance of these new conceptualizations of class, there are still retractors who favor older, more functionalist views of continuous hierarchies rather than classes at all. Years ago,

Dennis Wrong (1959, 1964) outlined what he called realist versus nominalist definitions of class. As Kingston's (2000) recent attempt at revival shows, the realist places emphasis on clear class boundaries in people identifying themselves as members of a particular class and interacting most with others in the same class; in other words, forming distinct social groupings based on class divisions. There is evidence that Americans are less likely to think about common economic class interests and are more likely to associate with others on the basis of non-class lifestyle or sub cultural preferences rather than within their own economic class (Kingston 2000).

However, this decline in class voting is occurring to a great extent in the United States only, and the United States is most unique in lower-class nonvoting. In other words, something in the United States has led to the neglect of issues important to the less affluent (Kerbo and Gonzalez 2003). The majority of sociologists who continue to argue that class divisions remain powerful argue that when the interests of the less affluent are being ignored in the political system, this in itself suggests an element of class conflict.(LeDuc, Niemi, and Norris 1996; Evans 1999; Clark and Lipset 200 I).

Functionalism and Social Stratification

Functional theories emphasize mutuality in relations between elites and commoners; elites are seen as providing managerial benefits, and the commoners' part of the bargain is to produce the surplus necessary to adequately reward these services**.** The original development of the Functionalist Theory of Social Stratification is associated primarily with an article entitled "Some Principles of Stratification [K. Davis and W. Moore 1945]. Davies and Moore [and other later Functionalists] argue that some forms of social stratification exist in all known societies. Capitalist societies are characterized by inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth, social status and power; in former State Socialist societies economic inequalities [although considerable] may have been somewhat smaller than in capitalist societies but political power was more heavily concentrated among senior Communist Party politicians and bureaucrats while in many developing countries economic inequalities are greater than in industrialized societies whether capitalist or state socialist.

Functionalists have therefore argued that the existence of some form of social stratification in every known society implies that social stratification [and the inequalities of income, wealth, power and status implied by it] must be both desirable and inevitable. Social stratification is seen as desirable because it meets one of the so-called functional pre-requisites in all societies of ensuring that individuals are allocated to suitable occupational roles and that they will perform these roles effectively which will contribute to the economic and social well-being of all members of society whatever their positions within the system of social stratification and thereby contribute to the stability of society as a whole. It is important to consider Functionalist analyses of the different aspects of social stratification: i.e. occupational differences in income and wealth, differences in social status and differences in power. As we shall see Functionalists describe occupational differences in income and wealth as involving a hierarchy of a large

number of slightly differentiated and non-antagonistic social strata rather than as involving a limited number of antagonistic social classes as in Marxist Class Theory and, to a lesser extent in Weberian Class Theory.]**.** Differences in income as between different occupations arise because of differences in the functional importance of different occupations and because only limited numbers of individuals have the talents necessary for the effective performance of the functionally most important occupations. Functionalists argue that in some cases such talents are scarce because they are innate only to a minority within a society's population and in other cases that such talents are scarce because they can be developed only after long periods of onerous training.

Modern World-Systems Theory

Over the last couple of decades, it has become clear that one of the most important new theories related to social stratification comes under the general title of the modern world-systems theory. It is now evident that no clear understanding of social stratification in the United States or any other country can be achieved without reference to the affects of the modern world system. The growing income inequality in the United States, the growing class conflict in Europe over changes in class relations and rewards, the Asian economic crisis beginning in 1997 (earlier for Japan), to name just a few topics, must be considered in relation to changes in the modern world system. We must also include major world events, such as colonialism, World War 1 / II. and the Cold War, along with all the events and conditions these world-shaping events caused, as related to changes in the modern world system.

In brief, from the works of Wallerstein (1974, 1977, 1980, 1989, 1999), Frank (1969, 1975, 1978, 1998), Bornsehier (1995), Chase-Dunn (1989), and Chirot (1986), modern world systems theory considers nations to be ranked in ways similar to the international system of social stratification. From about 1500 AD, when the new modern world system began, nations have been in competition with each other for dominance over other nations, especially with respect to economic domination. Core nations are the richer nations on top of the modern world system, with semi periphery and periphery nations in lower ranks in the system, much like middleclass, working class, and the poor in an internal stratification system. Throughout this period of core nation competition and conflict, aspects of a country's political economy, including its system of social stratification, have had negative or positive effects on the country's ability to maintain or improve its ranking in the world of nations. Conversely, this modern world system has had effects on domestic political economies and systems of social stratification in both rich and poor countries.

Esping- Anderson (1990) and Goodin et al. (1999) have specified two distinct models of capitalism and shown their differing outcomes for people in differing class positions within a nation. To their two models of capitalism, which are found mostly in Europe and North America (Kerbo and McKinstry 1995; Kerbo 2006b).

Conclusion

Patterns of social stratification especially those related to differences in occupation/income/wealth/class, power and status in different societies have been analyzed using the differing sociological perspectives of Marxism, Weberianism, Feminism, Functionalism and, indeed, Postmodernism. In the functionalist theory which was developed initially in the 1940s and 1950s it was argued that some form of social stratification exists in all known societies, that hierarchical patterns of social stratification were both desirable and inevitable and that occupational differences in income were explicable in terms of differences

in the functional importance of different occupations combined with limited availability within societies' populations of the talents necessary for the performance of the more functionally important and difficult occupational roles and that inequalities of social status were similarly inevitable.

Conflict theorists have argued that Functionalists have in general overstated the extent to which societies are organized in the interests of all of societies' members and overstated also the useful contributions which existing social institutions make to the stability of societies and understated both the extent to which societies are organized primarily in the interests of privileged minorities and against the interests of the majority and the possible dysfunctions of exiting social institutions. Consequently, the Conflict theorists argue, Functionalist theories contain inherent conservative biases in support of the social status quo and against arguments for radical social change. In sum, social stratification is present in all social structures and can limit or expand the frontiers of human or societal evolution.

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