LESSON 22 SOCIAL STRUCTURE PART-IV

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22. SOCIAL STRUCTURE PART-IV

22.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Marxist View of Social Structure

- Classification of Social Structure

22.1 Introduction to Social Structure

The concept of social structure serves as a fundamental analytical tool across sociological thought, yet its interpretation varies dramatically depending on the theoretical lens applied. Two profoundly contrasting perspectives are offered by Marxist theory and the work of Talcott Parsons. The Marxist view posits social structure as fundamentally shaped by the economic base, specifically the mode of production and the inherent relations of production that define social classes and their antagonistic interests. From this vantage point, social structure is inherently conflictual, characterized by the struggle between the dominant and subordinate classes, with institutions in the superstructure (e.g., law, politics, culture) ultimately reflecting and serving the interests of the economic elite. In stark contrast, Talcott Parsons, a leading proponent of structural functionalism, offers a systematic framework for understanding social structure rooted in the principles of order, integration, and shared values. Parsons' work provides a conceptual classification of social systems based on their functional imperatives, such as his AGIL schema, which delineates how different structural components fulfill essential societal needs like adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance. This introduction will briefly explore these two divergent, yet equally influential, approaches to conceptualizing and classifying the intricate architecture of human societies.

22.2 Marxist View of Social Structure

Karl Marx's view of social structure is fundamentally rooted in the concept of **historical materialism**, which posits that the economic organization of society (the "base") is the primary determinant of all other social institutions, ideas, and culture (the "superstructure"). He viewed history as a progression of different

modes of production, each characterized by specific class relations and inherent contradictions that eventually lead to revolutionary change.

I. The Base and Superstructure: This is the foundational model for understanding Marxist social structure:

- **The Base (Economic Structure):** This refers to the **mode of production**, which consists of two key components: **Forces of Production:** These are the means by which society produces its material necessities. This includes: the labor power**,** that is, the human capacity to work and means of production that include the tools, technology, land, raw materials, and factories used in production. **Relations of Production:** These are the social relationships people enter into in order to produce and distribute goods and services. They are defined by the ownership and control of the means of production. In a capitalist society, these relations are primarily between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

- **The Superstructure:** This encompasses all other aspects of society, which are shaped and determined by the economic base. It includes political institutions such as the state, laws, government; Ideologies such as Belief systems, philosophies, moral values, religion, art, culture, and education and social consciousness that involves the prevailing ideas and beliefs within a society.

Marx argued that the superstructure functions to legitimate and maintain the existing economic base, particularly the power of the ruling class. For example, in a capitalist society, laws protect private property, education promotes values like individualism and competition, and cultural narratives often glorify wealth and consumerism.

II. Class and Class Struggle: For Marx, **class** is not merely a matter of income or social status but is defined by one's relationship to the means of production. There are two primary Classes in Capitalism, that is, **Bourgeoisie (Capitalists) and Proletariats (Workers).** Former are the owners of capital, who derive their wealth from the exploitation of wage labor. They control the production process and profit from the surplus value created by workers. Latter are those who possess no means of production other than their own labor power, which they are forced to sell to the capitalists to survive. They are the exploited class.

Marx argued that throughout history, societies have been characterized by class struggle. This antagonism arises from the fundamental conflict of interest between

the exploiting class (which seeks to maintain and increase its control and wealth) and the exploited class (which seeks liberation from oppression). In capitalism, this struggle is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This struggle is seen as the driving force of historical change.

Marx also goes on to distinguish between the False Consciousness and Class Consciousness. **False Consciousness** is the inability of the proletariat to recognize their true class interests and the nature of their exploitation. They may internalize the dominant ideology of the bourgeoisie, believing that their situation is natural, fair, or even their own fault. **Class Consciousness** is the realization by the proletariat of their shared exploitation and common interests, leading to a collective understanding of their power to bring about revolutionary change. Marx believed that this awakening was essential for the overthrow of capitalism.

III. Exploitation and Surplus Value: In capitalism, exploitation occurs when the value of the labor that workers produce is greater than the wages they receive. Surplus value is the difference between the value produced by labor and the cost of labor (wages). This surplus value is appropriated by the capitalist as profit. Marx saw this appropriation as the essence of exploitation and the source of capitalist wealth.

IV. Alienation

Marx argued that capitalism leads to alienation for the worker, a state of estrangement from various aspects of their lives: This alienation that workers experiences is from the product of labor, wherein the workers do not own or control the products they create. The products become alien objects that stand over them. There is alienation from the act of labor, where the work becomes a meaningless, repetitive, and dehumanizing activity, rather than a creative and fulfilling one. Workers feel no joy or connection to their labor. Alienation from their species-being (human essence) alienated workers from their true human potential as humans are by nature creative, social beings who find fulfillment in productive activity. In alienation from other human beings, worker gets disconnected**.** Capitalism fosters competition and atomization, separating individuals rather than fostering cooperation. Workers compete with each other, and the relationship between capitalist and worker is inherently antagonistic.

V. Historical Development and Revolution

Marx saw history as a series of distinct modes of production, each containing the seeds of its own destruction through internal contradictions and class struggle:

- **Primitive Communism:** Early hunter-gatherer societies with no private property or class divisions.

- **Ancient Society:** Slave-based societies (e.g., Roman Empire) where landowners exploited slaves.

- **Feudalism:** Agrarian societies where feudal lords exploited serfs.

- **Capitalism:** Industrial societies where the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat.

Marx predicted that the inherent contradictions of capitalism (e.g., increasing exploitation, growing inequality, cyclical crises) would lead to intensifying class struggle, culminating in a proletarian revolution. This revolution would overthrow the capitalist system, abolish private property, and establish a temporary dictatorship of the proletariat to transition towards Communism**.** A classless, stateless society where the means of production are collectively owned, and production is geared towards meeting human needs rather than generating profit. In this ideal society, alienation would cease, and human beings would realize their full potential.

The Marxist view of social structure is a dynamic and conflictual one, emphasizing the central role of economic relations and class struggle in shaping all aspects of society. It views capitalism as an inherently exploitative system destined to be overthrown by the revolutionary action of the working class, leading to a more egalitarian communist society.

22.3 Pattern Variables

Talcott Parsons identified five pairs of pattern variables. These five dichotomies represent the fundamental dilemmas that social actors face in any interaction, and how societies institutionalize solutions to these dilemmas defines their unique social structure.

1. Affectivity vs. Affective Neutrality

- **Affectivity (Emotionality/Gratification):** This orientation emphasizes the free and open expression of emotions and the immediate gratification of needs and desires. Relationships are characterized by warmth, intimacy, and emotional involvement. Ex.The relationship between a parent and a young child, where emotional bonding, nurturing, and immediate responses to needs (e.g., crying for food) are expected and highly valued.

- **Affective Neutrality (Emotional Detachment/Discipline):** This orientation emphasizes emotional restraint, objectivity, and the postponement of gratification. Interactions are governed by rational considerations rather than personal feelings. The relationship between a doctor and a patient. Ex. A doctor is expected to remain emotionally detached to make objective diagnoses and apply universal medical knowledge, even in distressing situations. Similarly, in a workplace, emotional displays are often minimized for efficiency.

2. Self-Orientation vs. Collectivity-Orientation

- **Self-Orientation:** This orientation prioritizes the individual's own interests, goals, and needs. Actions are primarily driven by personal gain, profit, or self-fulfillment. Ex. A business entrepreneur or a competitive athlete primarily focused on personal success, wealth accumulation, or winning.

- **Collectivity-Orientation:** This orientation prioritizes the interests, goals, and welfare of the larger group, community, or society. Actions are guided by a sense of duty, altruism, or collective responsibility. Ex. A soldier sacrificing their life for their country, a community organizer working for the benefit of their neighborhood, or a religious leader prioritizing the spiritual well-being of their congregation.

3. Universalism vs. Particularism

- **Universalism:** This orientation dictates that individuals should be treated according to general, impartial rules, laws, and objective criteria. Decisions are made based on universal principles that apply to everyone, regardless of personal relationships. Ex. A judge applying the same legal statutes to all defendants, regardless of their social status or personal connections. A university admissions committee evaluating applicants based solely on grades, test scores, and essays.

- **Particularism:** This orientation dictates that individuals should be treated differently based on their specific relationships to the actor or their unique

characteristics. Decisions are influenced by personal ties, loyalties, or subjective considerations. Ex. A parent treating their own child differently (e.g., giving preferential treatment) compared to other children. A politician granting favors or jobs to family members or close friends (nepotism/cronyism).

4. Ascription vs. Achievement

- **Ascription:** This orientation values and judges individuals based on their inherent, inborn, or given qualities over which they have little control. Status is assigned at birth or based on unchangeable characteristics. Ex. Being a member of a royal family, belonging to a specific caste, being male or female in a highly gender-stratified society, or having a certain race in a racially hierarchical system.

- **Achievement:** This orientation values and judges individuals based on their performance, accomplishments, skills, efforts, and earned qualities. Status is gained through individual effort and demonstrated capability. Ex. Earning a university degree, getting a promotion based on work performance, winning a competition, or becoming a successful entrepreneur.

5. Specificity vs. Diffuseness

- **Specificity:** This orientation refers to interactions that are narrowly defined, limited to specific roles, and confined to precise obligations. Relationships are functional and task-oriented, without broad personal involvement. Ex. The relationship between a customer and a cashier in a supermarket. Their interaction is limited to the transaction of buying and selling; there are no expectations of personal friendship or support beyond that specific role.

- **Diffuseness:** This orientation refers to interactions that are broad, open-ended, and involve a wide range of obligations and expectations. Relationships are holistic and involve a broad scope of personal involvement. Ex. The relationship between spouses in a marriage. Expectations are diffuse, extending beyond specific tasks to include emotional support, companionship, shared responsibilities, and a deep, multifaceted personal bond.

22.4 Interplay and Societal Evolution

Parsons argued that these pattern variables are not just individual choices but are institutionalized in different social systems. He saw a general trend of societal evolution, particularly with modernization, moving from a dominance of:

- Affectivity → Affective Neutrality

- Collectivity-Orientation → Self-Orientation

- Particularism → Universalism

- Ascription → Achievement

- Diffuseness → Specificity

For example, traditional societies tend to be characterized more by affectivity, collectivity-orientation, particularism, ascription, and diffuseness, while modern industrial societies lean towards affective neutrality, self-orientation, universalism, achievement, and specificity in their formal institutions. However, even in modern societies, elements of the "traditional" poles persist, especially in primary groups like families or informal social networks.

These pattern variables provide a powerful analytical tool for comparing different societies, understanding social change, and analyzing the expectations and norms within various social roles and institutions.

22.5 Classification of Social Structure

The typologies —universalistic-ascribed, universalistic-achievement, particularistic-ascribed, and particularistic-achievement—are derived from **Talcott Parsons' "Pattern Variables."** Parsons, a prominent structural functionalist, developed these variables to describe the fundamental dilemmas or choices actors face in social situations, and how these choices shape the nature of social interactions and, consequently, social structures. These four patterns combine two of Parsons' key dichotomies:

1. **Universalism vs. Particularism:**

   o **Universalism:** Refers to treating all individuals according to general rules, laws, and abstract principles, regardless of their personal relationships or unique characteristics. Decisions are based on objective criteria.

   o **Particularism:** Refers to treating individuals differently based on their unique relationships to the actor (e.g., family, friends, community) or specific, subjective circumstances. Decisions are based on personal connections or specific situations.

2. **Ascription vs. Achievement:**

   o **Ascription:** Refers to evaluating individuals based on their inherent, inborn, or given qualities over which they have little control (e.g., race, gender, family background, age, caste). Status is *given*.

   o **Achievement:** Refers to evaluating individuals based on their performance, accomplishments, skills, efforts, or earned qualities. Status is *earned*.

   By combining these two pairs, **Parsons identifies four ideal types of social structures or orientations within social systems**. These are not mutually exclusive in reality; societies often exhibit a mix, but one pattern might be dominant in certain spheres or overall.

   1. Universalistic-Ascribed Pattern: In this pattern, individuals are judged and treated according to universalistic rules, but the basis for these rules and the distribution of authority are tied to ascribed qualities. This means that there are general laws and systems in place, but who gets to apply them, who benefits from them, or who holds power is determined by characteristics people are born with or cannot change. Status is granted to groups, and individuals derive their status from their group membership. "Universalistic" aspect implies a system of general application. Laws are written, policies are formalized, and a bureaucracy might exist to implement them. There's an appearance of order and predictability. In "Ascribed" aspect, the critical element is *who* these universalistic rules favor and *who* they disadvantage. The very framework of society is designed to maintain the power and privilege of specific, inherited groups, while systematically limiting the opportunities of others based on their ascribed characteristics. Merit, effort, or individual talent from the "wrong" ascribed group is often irrelevant or even

suppressed. Social Mobility is extremely low and often legally or culturally restricted. Individuals are largely trapped in the social stratum of their birth. The system's legitimacy often rests on tradition, divine right, or a powerful ideology that justifies the inherent superiority of the ascribed dominant group.

Nazi Germany is finest example of such a pattern: While highly rational and bureaucratic in its organization (universalistic aspects), the entire system was built upon an ideology of racial purity and supremacy (ascribed qualities). Laws and policies were applied universally to reinforce the dominance of the "Aryan race" and persecute "non-Aryans." Power was concentrated in the hands of those deemed "Aryan."

2. **Universalistic-Achievement Pattern:** This pattern emphasizes that individuals are evaluated, rewarded, and gain status based on their achievements, performance, and demonstrated competence, with these evaluations being governed by impersonal, objective, and universal standards. It's the hallmark of modern, meritocratic societies. "Universalistic" aspect here involves rules, laws, and criteria are applied equally to everyone, regardless of personal relationships, family ties, race, gender, or any other ascribed characteristic. The focus is on fairness and impartiality. "Achievement" aspect includes what you *do* (your performance, skills, education, work ethic) is paramount. Opportunity is ideally open to all, and success is linked to individual effort and capability. Social Mobility is relatively high, allowing individuals to move up or down the social ladder based on their achievements (or lack thereof). Legitimacy rests on the principles of fairness, equality of opportunity, and the belief that the most capable individuals will rise to the top. This is often linked to rational-legal authority.

This pattern is characteristic of modern, industrial, and democratic societies. Individuals are judged and rewarded based on their achievements and performance, and these evaluations are guided by universalistic standards (impartial rules, laws, and objective criteria). Meritocracy is a core principle. Modern Western Democracies are best example of this such as USA, Canada, much of Europe.

3. Particularistic-Ascribed Pattern: In this pattern, individuals' positions, status, roles, opportunities and treatment are determined primarily by their ascribed qualities (birth, kinship, gender, age), and relationships are governed by particularistic ties. Loyalty, personal connections, and who you are related to are more important than universal rules or individual achievements. In "Particularistic" aspect, relationships are personal and based on specific connections rather than abstract rules. Favoritism toward kin, friends, or co-ethnics is common and often expected. There's a strong emphasis on "us vs. them." In

"Ascribed" aspect, ones place in society is largely fixed at birth. Family lineage, caste, tribal affiliation, or gender determine your rights, duties, and social standing. Your personal effort or abilities are often secondary to your inherent group membership. Social Mobility is extremely limited and often seen as destabilizing to the social order. Legitimacy is rooted in tradition, custom, kinship loyalty, and often religious beliefs that sanctify the established hierarchy. Traditional Caste Systems in India follows this pattern. An individual's status, occupation, and even social interactions were rigidly determined by their birth into a specific caste (ascribed). Relationships and interactions were highly particularistic, with specific rules and expectations governing behavior between members of different castes, and loyalty to one's own caste was paramount. Feudal Societies where status was determined by birth into a noble family, or as a serf, knight, etc. (ascribed) are also one such kind.

4. Particularistic-Achievement Pattern: This pattern combines the emphasis on particularistic relationships with a focus on achievement, but the achievements are often specific to the particularistic context or benefit the particularistic group. Individuals may strive for achievement, but their opportunities and rewards are filtered through and often serve specific, personal ties or group interests. This complex pattern describes situations where achievements are valued, but their pursuit and recognition are channeled through and often dependent upon particularistic relationships. Success is often about *who you know* and how you leverage those connections to achieve specific, often self-interested, goals. "Particularistic" aspect involves Personal connections, loyalty to a specific group (family, political faction, gang), or patron-client relationships are crucial. Universal rules or objective criteria are often secondary or even disregarded in favor of these ties. In "Achievement" aspect, individuals are seen to still strive for success, wealth, power, or influence. However, their ability to "achieve" is heavily mediated by their social network and ability to cultivate beneficial relationships. The achievement often serves to strengthen the particularistic network itself. Social Mobility can exist, but it's often within a specific network or based on the ability to navigate and manipulate particularistic ties. It's not "open" in the universalistic sense. Legitimacy is often unstable, relying on charisma, coercion, or the ability of the leader to continually deliver benefits to their network. Mafia or Organized Crime Syndicates follow this pattern where advancement within the organization (achievement, e.g., proving loyalty, ruthlessness, or strategic thinking) is entirely dependent on personal connections, trust, and loyalty to the "family" (particularistic). Universal laws are disregarded; internal "justice" operates on particularistic principles. Even Nepotism/Cronyism in some organizations/societies will fall in this category. While an individual might "achieve" a position, the opportunity for that achievement, or the ultimate promotion, is heavily influenced by personal connections or family ties (particularistic), rather than purely universalistic criteria. The achievement serves to consolidate power or wealth within a particular network.

22.6 Conclusion

It's important to remember that these are ideal types. Real societies and social interactions are complex and often exhibit elements of multiple patterns simultaneously, with shifts occurring over time (e.g., from more particularistic-ascribed structures to more universalistic-achievement ones as societies modernize). Parsons used these variables as a framework to understand how social systems function and evolve.

Parsons' pattern variables provide a powerful lens through which to analyze the underlying cultural values and normative expectations that shape social structures. They help us understand why different societies, or different spheres within the same society, operate according to different rules. While modern societies tend to emphasize universalism and achievement (especially in formal institutions), remnants of particularism and ascription often persist, particularly in informal interactions, family life, and areas where traditional values remain strong. Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending social change, conflict, and stability.

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