LESSON 28 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION PART II

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28. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION PART II

28.0 Objectives

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

- Theories of Social Stratification
- Critical Understanding of these theories

28.1 Introduction

Social stratification refers to the structured and hierarchical arrangement of individuals and groups in a society based on unequal access to resources, power, and prestige. It is a universal feature of human societies, though its forms and justifications vary across time and space. Thinkers across history—ranging from classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle to modern sociologists like Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons—have attempted to understand and explain the origins, functions, and implications of stratification. Some view it as a natural or functional necessity, while others see it as a product of power dynamics and exploitation. This diversity of perspectives reflects broader philosophical, economic, and political worldviews. Understanding these theoretical frameworks is essential for grasping how inequality is maintained, challenged, or transformed in society. The following discussion outlines the major contributions and critiques of classical and contemporary thinkers on the subject of social stratification.

28.2 Early Philosophers' Understanding of Social Stratification

Plato, in his seminal work The Republic, proposed a tripartite theory of society in which people are divided into three classes based on their innate abilities: the ruling class (philosopher-kings), the auxiliaries (warriors), and the producers (artisans, farmers). He argued that justice is achieved when each class performs its designated function. For Plato, stratification is natural and necessary for the stability of the state, and he emphasized meritocracy—individuals should rise or fall according to their natural aptitude and education. Plato's model is often criticized for being elitist and undemocratic, as it legitimizes a rigid, hierarchical

order that could justify inequality as ‘natural’. His vision lacks mechanisms for mobility or protest against oppressive rule.
Aristotle viewed social stratification as an inevitable aspect of human society. In Politics, he emphasized the naturalness of hierarchy and inequality, claiming that some people are naturally suited to rule, while others are fit to be ruled (e.g., slaves, women). He saw the household as the basic unit of society, encompassing a master-slave dynamic, and argued that different social roles fulfill different but complementary functions. Aristotle’s acceptance of slavery and his deterministic view of hierarchy have been severely criticized for promoting social immobility and institutional inequality. His views have often been used historically to justify oppressive social orders.

Locke, a liberal philosopher, did not explicitly develop a theory of stratification, but his ideas about natural rights, property, and government by consent indirectly influenced the discourse on inequality. He emphasized equality in the state of nature but justified inequality of wealth through the idea of labor and private property. Those who work and accumulate property deserve their social standing. Locke’s notion of property has been critiqued for laying the foundation for capitalist inequality. His liberalism often masks structural inequalities by assuming that all individuals have equal opportunity to succeed, which is seldom true in practice.

Rousseau, in his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, distinguished between natural inequality (based on age, strength) and moral/political inequality (based on wealth, status). He argued that social inequality is man-made and emerged with the development of private property. Rousseau advocated for a society based on the general will, where inequality would be minimized through collective governance and social contracts. Though Rousseau’s critique of inequality is powerful, his idea of returning to a more “natural” or egalitarian social order is often seen as idealistic and utopian, lacking concrete mechanisms to address stratification in modern complex societies.

Bentham's utilitarianism focuses on maximizing happiness or utility. Though not a stratification theorist per se, his ideas supported policies aiming at reducing social inequality through welfare and rational law. He saw society as a calculable entity where social arrangements should lead to the greatest good for the greatest number. Bentham’s approach is too abstract and mechanical, ignoring the power dynamics and deep-rooted structures that sustain stratification. His utilitarian calculus can also justify inequality if it benefits the majority.

28.3 Marx Understanding of Social Stratification

Marx offered the most systematic and radical theory of social stratification, based on historical materialism. He argued that stratification arises from the economic structure of society, particularly in the division between the bourgeoisie (owners

of the means of production) and the proletariat (working class). Marx emphasized exploitation as the core of capitalist inequality and believed that class struggle would eventually lead to a classless, communist society. While Marx's theory powerfully critiques capitalist exploitation, critics argue it is economically deterministic, neglecting non-economic forms of inequality (e.g., gender, race, caste). Moreover, his prediction of the inevitable collapse of capitalism has not materialized in the way he envisioned.

Karl Marx's understanding of social stratification is foundational to conflict theory in sociology. Unlike functionalists who see stratification as necessary and beneficial, Marx viewed it as a source of conflict, exploitation, and alienation inherent in capitalist societies.

His key ideas:

1. The Primacy of Economic Relations (Historical Materialism):
For Marx, the economic structure of society, specifically the "mode of production," is the base (or substructure) upon which everything else, the "superstructure" (including politics, law, religion, culture, and ideology), is built. He argued that throughout history, the way societies produce their material life determines their social organization. Social stratification, therefore, is rooted in people's relationship to the means of production.

2. Two Main Antagonistic Classes:
In capitalist societies, Marx identified two fundamental and antagonistic classes:

The Bourgeoisie (Capitalists): This is the dominant, ruling class that **owns the means of production**. The means of production include factories, land, machinery, tools, raw materials, and capital. Their power and wealth derive from their ownership and control over these resources. They are driven by the pursuit of profit.
The Proletariat (Workers/Laborers): This is the subordinate, exploited class that does not own the means of production. Their only significant asset is their **labor power, which they must sell to the bourgeoisie in exchange for wages to survive.
3. Exploitation and Surplus Value:
Marx argued that the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is inherently exploitative. This exploitation occurs through the concept of surplus value.

Workers produce goods and services that have a certain value. However, the capitalists pay the workers only a fraction of this value in the form of wages, just enough to cover their subsistence and reproduction of their labor power. The difference between the value workers produce and the wages they receive is the surplus value, which the capitalist appropriates as profit. Marx saw this as theft of the workers' labor.

4. Alienation:
Under capitalism, Marx believed that workers become alienated from:
The product of their labor: They produce things that they do not own or control, and which become alien objects to them.
The process of labor: Work becomes a means to an end (earning wages), rather than a fulfilling creative activity. Workers have little control over how they work.
Their species-being (human essence): Labor, which should be a defining characteristic of human creativity, becomes dehumanizing and a burden.
Fellow workers: Capitalism fosters competition among workers, hindering collective solidarity.

5. Class Conflict and Revolution:
For Marx, social stratification is not about order, but about conflict. The inherent contradiction between the interests of the bourgeoisie (maximizing profit) and the proletariat (improving wages and conditions) leads to inevitable class struggle.
Initially, this struggle might be localized (e.g., individual strikes).
As capitalism develops, Marx predicted immiseration of the proletariat (their conditions would worsen), leading to a growing class consciousness. This means workers would become aware of their shared exploitation and their collective interests. This class consciousness would eventually lead to a proletarian revolution, where the working class would overthrow the capitalist system.

6. The Goal: A Classless (Communist) Society:
Marx believed that the revolution would abolish private ownership of the means of production, leading to a temporary "dictatorship of the proletariat" to dismantle the vestiges of capitalism. Ultimately, this would usher in a communist society, characterized by: Collective ownership of the means of production, Abolition of private property, Elimination of classes and thus, social stratification and production based on "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Critiques of Marx's Understanding of Social Stratification:

Economic Reductionism: Critics argue that Marx overemphasized economic factors as the sole determinant of social stratification, neglecting other important dimensions like status (prestige) and power (political influence), as highlighted by Max Weber.

Overly Simplistic Class Model: Modern societies are far more complex than a two-class model. The growth of a large middle class, professional classes, and diverse occupational structures challenges Marx's prediction of class polarization.

Failure of Predicted Revolution: The proletarian revolutions Marx predicted did not occur in advanced capitalist countries. Instead, capitalism adapted, partly

through reforms (e.g., welfare states, labor laws) that improved working conditions and wages.

Authoritarian Regimes: Attempts to implement Marxist ideas (e.g., in the Soviet Union or China) often resulted in authoritarian states with new forms of inequality and control, rather than the classless utopia.

Neglect of Non-Class Inequalities: Marx primarily focused on class. Critics point out that inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality are also significant and cannot be simply reduced to economic class relations.

Despite these criticisms, Marx's theory remains incredibly influential. It provided a powerful lens for analyzing power relations, exploitation, and the systemic nature of inequality under capitalism, and it continues to inspire critical sociological inquiry and social movements.

28.4 Durkheim Understanding of Social Stratification

Durkheim viewed stratification as a functional necessity that ensures social cohesion. In societies with mechanical solidarity, little stratification exists, but as societies evolve into organic solidarity, roles become more specialized, and inequality increases. He emphasized moral consensus and division of labor as stabilizing forces. Durkheim’s emphasis on stability and consensus tends to downplay conflict and coercion. He assumes that all forms of inequality are functional and justified, ignoring how they may benefit certain groups at the expense of others.

Parsons argued that social stratification is universal, necessary, and functional for society. According to him, society ranks individuals based on value consensus—positions that are functionally important and require special skills are rewarded with higher prestige and income. This ensures that the most capable fill the most critical roles. Parsons is criticized for being ahistorical, conservative, and for justifying inequality. He assumes that all positions are filled based on merit, ignoring discrimination, privilege, and unequal access to opportunities.

Moore and Davis further developed Parsons’ ideas by arguing that stratification serves a key purpose in ensuring that the most talented individuals are motivated to fill functionally important roles. They claimed that higher rewards (such as income and prestige) are needed to attract the most qualified people to these positions. This theory is heavily criticized for circular reasoning (important positions are highly rewarded, and positions are important because they are highly rewarded). Moreover, it ignores structural barriers that prevent equally talented people from attaining high-status roles.

Tumin challenged the Moore-Davis thesis by arguing that stratification may hinder, rather than promote, societal efficiency. He questioned the assumption that high rewards are necessary or that all individuals have equal access to opportunities. According to Tumin, inequality can lead to discontent, reduced motivation, and limited mobility for the disadvantaged. While Tumin offers a compelling critique, he does not propose a systematic alternative to functionalism. His argument tends to focus more on negative consequences than on constructive solutions to stratification.

28.5 Weber Understanding of Social Stratification

Max Weber, a German sociologist, offered a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of social stratification than Karl Marx. While influenced by Marx's emphasis on economic factors, Weber argued that social position isn't solely determined by one's relationship to the means of production. Instead, he proposed that stratification arises from the interplay of three distinct, though often overlapping, dimensions: class, status, and party (or power).

For Weber, class refers to an individual's economic situation or their position in the market. It's based on their "life chances" – the opportunities they have to acquire goods, earn income, and gain favorable living conditions. Unlike Marx, who focused almost exclusively on the ownership (or non-ownership) of the means of production, Weber broadened the concept of class to include a person's market situation. This includes not just property ownership, but also:

Skills, education, and qualifications: Highly skilled professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers, engineers) can command high salaries and better life chances even if they don't own factories.

Marketable services: The ability to offer valuable services in the labor market is a key determinant of class.

Categories of Class: Weber recognized a more complex class structure than Marx's two-class model. He identified various classes, including:
The propertied upper class (capitalists)
The propertyless white-collar workers (professionals, managers)
The petty bourgeoisie (small business owners, independent professionals)
The manual working class (proletariat)

Status refers to social honor or prestige. It's about the social estimation of an individual's or group's worth, irrespective of their purely economic standing. Status groups are often characterized by shared lifestyles, values, consumption patterns, and social recognition. They might form based on occupation, Education, Family background/Lineage, Ethnicity/Religion.

Status groups often engage in "social closure," limiting interaction and marriage with those outside their group to maintain their social honor and privileges. A crucial aspect of Weber's theory is that status can be independent of class. A poor but highly respected religious leader might have high status but low class. Conversely, a "nouveau riche" individual might have high class (wealth) but initially low status if their wealth is not accompanied by traditionally valued social honor or lifestyle.

Party" in Weber's framework refers to organized groups or associations that aim to acquire social power and influence communal action, often in the political sphere. It's about the ability to realize one's will despite resistance from others. Power can stem from various sources, not just economic wealth:

Formal political organizations: Political parties, government bureaucracies, military.

Informal associations: Interest groups, pressure groups, social movements, professional associations.

Charisma: The personal appeal and influence of a leader.

Interplay with Class and Status: While parties often represent the interests of particular classes or status groups, they can also cut across these lines. For instance, a political party might gain support from various social classes or status groups based on shared ideological goals.

Bureaucracy: Weber extensively studied bureaucracy as a highly rationalized form of organization that concentrates power due to its specialized knowledge, hierarchical structure, and impersonal rules. He saw bureaucracy as a key feature of modern power structures.

28.6 Structural Functional Theory of Social Stratification

The Structural Functionalist theory of social stratification, primarily articulated by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore in their 1945 paper "Some Principles of Stratification," offers a macro-level perspective on why social inequality exists and persists in society.

1. Society as a System (Organic Analogy):
Structural functionalism views society as a complex system, much like a living organism. Each part of society (institutions like family, education, economy, government) works together to maintain the stability and smooth functioning of the whole. Social stratification, therefore, is seen as a necessary and beneficial component of this system.

2. Functional Necessity of Stratification:
Davis and Moore argue that social stratification is inevitable and universal because it serves vital functions for society. They contend that:
* Unequal Distribution of Rewards: Society needs to ensure that the most important and functionally necessary positions are filled by the most capable and qualified individuals. To achieve this, it offers unequal rewards (e.g., higher salaries, greater prestige, more power) for these positions.
* Motivation and Incentive: These differential rewards act as incentives, motivating talented individuals to pursue long periods of training, make sacrifices, and strive for these demanding roles. Without such incentives, people might not be willing to undertake the effort required for highly skilled or responsible jobs.
* Role Allocation: Stratification acts as a mechanism for effectively allocating individuals to various social positions. It ensures that the "right" people (those with the necessary skills and talents) are channeled into the positions where they can contribute most effectively to society's overall well-being.
* Societal Stability: By ensuring that critical roles are filled by competent individuals, stratification contributes to social order and stability. It creates a hierarchy that is generally accepted as legitimate because it is perceived to be based on merit and the functional importance of different roles.

3. Functional Importance of Positions:
Davis and Moore assert that positions vary in their functional importance to society. Some jobs are deemed more crucial for societal survival and well-being than others. For example, a surgeon's role is considered more functionally important than a street sweeper's, as it requires more specialized knowledge, training, and carries greater responsibility.

4. Scarcity of Talent and Training:
They also highlight that only a limited number of individuals possess the innate talents and willingness to undergo the extensive training required for functionally important positions. This scarcity justifies the higher rewards for these roles, as society needs to attract these few qualified individuals.

For example, a complex society needs doctors, engineers, and political leaders. These roles require extensive education, specialized skills, and carry significant responsibility. According to Davis and Moore, society ensures these vital roles are filled by offering high salaries, prestige, and power, thereby motivating the most capable individuals to pursue these paths.

While influential, the Davis-Moore thesis has faced significant criticism:

Difficulty in Measuring "Functional Importance": Critics, most notably Melvin Tumin (1953), argue that it's difficult to objectively determine the "functional importance" of a position. Is an entertainer more "functionally important" than a

teacher? The theory often seems to justify existing inequalities rather than explain them objectively.

Ignores Power and Conflict: Functionalism tends to downplay the role of power, coercion, and conflict in shaping stratification. Critics (like conflict theorists) argue that stratification is often a result of dominant groups maintaining their privileges, rather than a neutral, beneficial process.

Assumes a Meritocracy (Myth of Meritocracy): The theory implies that social mobility is primarily based on merit and effort. However, critics point out that factors like inherited wealth, family connections, social class, gender, race, and ethnicity significantly limit opportunities and perpetuate inequality, regardless of individual talent or effort. Access to quality education and training is often stratified.

Justification of the Status Quo: Many see the theory as a conservative ideology that justifies existing inequalities and discourages social change. It suggests that if everyone is rewarded fairly based on their contribution, then those at the bottom deserve their position.

Dysfunctions of Stratification: Critics argue that stratification can be dysfunctional. It can lead to resentment, social unrest, and limit the full development of talent from lower strata due to lack of opportunity. It can also create barriers to social cohesion.

Oversimplification: The theory tends to oversimplify the complex realities of social inequality, reducing it to a simple equation of skill, importance, and reward. Despite these criticisms, the Davis-Moore thesis remains a foundational concept in the study of social stratification, offering a distinct perspective on why societies are structured hierarchically.

28.7 Conclusion

Theories of social stratification range from classical philosophical justifications to critical economic and sociological critiques. From Plato’s ideal hierarchy to Marx’s revolutionary vision, and from functionalist harmonies to conflictual realities, these theories provide a multi-dimensional understanding of how inequality is structured, justified, and challenged. While functionalist thinkers emphasize the necessity and utility of stratification, critics—especially Marx and Tumin—highlight its exploitative and dysfunctional aspects. Contemporary sociology often attempts to synthesize these insights, recognizing both the complex functionality and the structural injustices embedded in systems of social stratification.

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