Module 3 Social Structure and Social Change

Lecture 15
Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

Stratification systems essentially separate people into haves and have-nots. Attempting to analyse why stratification emerges, most social thinkers barring a few geniuses have concluded that some social inequality is inevitable.

The classical conservative position suggests that inequality is part of the law of nature. It holds that people are basically selfish and greedy. Social institutions must curb this greed and selfishness or the society will not function smoothly. The curbing is done by institutions; however, institutions also promote inequality. Inequality is the price societies must pay to ensure peace and order. Later, the social Darwinists proposed that because the resources of society were scarce and people had to compete for them, only the strongest, the most intelligent or those most willing to work would acquire most of the good things in life. This situation would result in inequality, but at the same time it would ensure that only the worthiest people in a society rose to positions of power and privilege. Ultimately, this would benefit society, for such people would provide enlightened leadership.

In the classical liberal view, humans are considered essentially good rather than selfish and greedy. It is society and its institutions that corrupt people, because each individual or group must struggle to get a share of the scarce goods and services that the society offers. The struggle becomes divisive and ends with the dominance of one group over others. The dominant group is able to exploit the others and, once in a position of power, to impose its will on the remainder of society. Inequality and stratification are then unavoidable.

Structural-Functionalist Perspective

The intellectual descendants of the conservative viewpoint are represented by the structural-functionalist school of thought in sociology. Functionalists stress the needs of the society rather than those of the individual, reasoning that the needs of individuals can be satisfied only within the society. The existence of every society depends on the regular performance of specific tasks that are difficult and require special intelligence, talent and training. Societies must institute systems of rewards with which to lure the most talented, the most intelligent and the best-trained individuals to perform these tasks. The positions most essential to the welfare of a society, and positions for which there are a few qualified personnel, must be the ones that are most highly rewarded (Davis and Moore 1945). It may be argued that collecting garbage is almost as vital to the health of a society as practising medicine, because uncollected garbage is a threat to public health, but collecting garbage a little training or talent; therefore, many individuals are capable of performing this function. Practising medicine, however, requires a long period of study and training. Not all individuals are capable of undergoing the discipline of such training; therefore,
there are fewer potential doctors than potential garbage collectors, and consequently doctors should be much better rewarded.

In addition, functional theorists stress the need for order, stability and balance in society. Even though it produces some social inequality, they maintain, a system of stratification has a stabilizing influence on society. Finally, functionalists conclude that inequality is built into the social system because not all types of work are equally necessary for, and thus valued by, the society.

**Conflict Perspective**

The intellectual descendants of the classical liberal view are today’s conflict theorists. They argue that inequality is the product of conflicts and dissensions that originate in people’s desire for power. The possession of scarce resources gives power to the possessor. Groups struggle with one another to obtain power, and the group that emerges victorious tries to impose a stratification system on the society by enrolling some institutions – religion, education, the political system – to legitimize it. Thus, stratification systems are mechanisms of coercion.

Karl Marx, the best-known conflict theorist, in The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), stated that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ – that all of history was a record of class conflicts caused by the unequal distribution of rewards in societies. Classes, according to Marx, are manifestations of economic differentiation. Classes are constituted not by income but by the position that one occupies or the functions one performs in the process of production. For example, if there are two blacksmiths, one the owner, and the other a paid worker, then both belong to two different classes, not one. The relation between the two is not simply a relation of domination and subordination but of exploitation.

Marx was not the first to discover social classes or their plights. Many philosophers did it before it. But Marx came to the centre stage when he succinctly wrote the last thesis on Feuerbach: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.’ Societies, Marx has analysed, have traversed through different stages – the hunting and gathering economy, the slave society, the feudal society and the capitalist society which will inevitably and unstoppably move on to socialism, and thereafter communism. Of these, the slave society, the feudal society and the capitalist society are class societies whereas the first and the last two are not. Classes are established when the surplus generated in the process of production is owned by a few individuals or groups, and will disappear when social ownership over the means of production will be established.

The institution of private ownership of the means of production leads to the further division of societies into social classes. These classes are in conflict with one another because the owners (bourgeoisie) have, and want to keep by any means, a monopoly of power over the nonowners (proletariat). The owners obtain and maintain power both by force and by instilling a value system and ideology in the masses that legitimize their power. Once they are in control and with
a system of stratification in operation, the system is perpetuated through various institutions. The family transmits either wealth, opportunity for education and prestige, or poverty and a lack of opportunity, from one generation to another. Schools, too, prepare some individuals for leadership roles and others for mental occupations. Religion helps people accept values that justify the status quo, encourages the poor to seek their reward in an afterlife and directs the faithful toward a spiritual quest or offers solace from pain because religion does not possess any rational explanation.

References


Questions

1. Explain the conservative and the liberal understanding of the concept of stratification.

2. Describe the structural-functionalist perspective on social stratification.

3. What is Marx’s view on social stratification?