Module 3  Social Structure and Social Change

Lecture 14
Social Differentiation and Social Stratification

In this lecture, we shall discuss the differences between social differentiation and social stratification.

Social differentiation involves the formation of horizontal social divisions whereas social stratification involves vertical (hierarchical) ranking of social strata.

Social Differentiation

The differentiation of tasks in society – or the division of labour – is a central focus of sociology. Sociologists have studied the effects of increasing specialization and complexity and have classified societies in terms of the nature and level of differentiation.

During the Scottish Enlightenment, writers like Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) and John Millar (1735-1801) distinguished four sociologically distinct stages of society:

- Hunters and gatherers
- Shepherd or pastoral society
- Husbandmen or agricultural society
- Commercial society

Karl Marx’s materialist conception of history represents social development in terms of successive modes of production – primitive communist society or primeval communal society or hunting and gathering economy, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society – which will inevitably and unstoppably move on to socialism, and thereafter communism. Marx introduces the idea that social differentiation is associated with inequality and that conflict among social classes is one of the principal motors of social change. We shall discuss in detail the contours of social classes in the section on social stratification.

Functionalism provides an alternative account of differentiation, concerned with the problem of interdependence among the parts of a differentiated system. Emile Durkheim set out a model of types of societies from elementary to more complex types. The two poles of this continuum were respectively characterized by mechanical and organic forms of solidarity.
## Mechanical Solidarity versus Organic Solidarity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Mechanical solidarity</th>
<th>Organic solidarity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Morphological (structural) basis</strong></td>
<td>(a) Based on resemblances (predominant in less advanced societies)</td>
<td>(a) Based on division of labour (predominately in more advanced societies)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(b) Segmental type (first clan-based, later territorial)</td>
<td>(b) Organized type (fusion of markets and growth of cities)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(c) Little interdependence (social bonds relatively weak)</td>
<td>(c) Much interdependency (social bonds relatively strong)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(d) Relatively low volume of population</td>
<td>(d) Relatively high volume of population</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(e) Relatively low material and moral density</td>
<td>(e) Relatively high material and moral density</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Types of norms (typified by law)</strong></td>
<td>(a) Rules with repressive sanctions</td>
<td>(a) Rules with restitutive sanctions</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(b) Prevalence of penal law</td>
<td>(b) Prevalence of cooperative law (civil, commercial, procedural, administrative and constitutional law)</td>
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<td><strong>Formal features of conscience collective</strong></td>
<td>(a) High volume</td>
<td>(a) Low volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) High intensity</td>
<td>(b) Low intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) High determinateness</td>
<td>(c) Low determinateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) Collective authority absolute</td>
<td>(d) More room for individual initiative and reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content of conscience collective</strong></td>
<td>(a) Highly religious</td>
<td>(a) Increasingly secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Transcendental (superior to human interests and beyond discussion)</td>
<td>(b) Human-orientated (concerned with human interests and open to discussion)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(c) Attaching supreme value to society and interests of society as a whole</td>
<td>(c) Attaching supreme value to individual dignity, equality of opportunity, work ethic and social justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) Concrete and specific</td>
<td>(d) Abstract and general</td>
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</table>

Talcott Parsons explained this scheme with a full theory of structural differentiation, where the four functional imperatives that all societies must meet allows a classification of societies in terms of the degree of institutional specialization around each of the functions these four functions were called the pattern variables, relating to the economy, polity, value system and motivation that all societies must satisfy. The AGIL (Adaptation, Goal-attainment, Integration and Latency) schema as Parsons believed was necessary for any social system to survive and develop. Let us briefly see what the AGIL scheme is all about.
• **Adaptation:** the securing of material resources available for distribution, which might be called the **economic** function

• **Goal-attainment:** akin to the **political** allocation of resources

• **Integration:** involving the development of a stable set of **norms**, as for example, embodied in law

• **Latency:** involving ordered patterns of **value-commitment**.

Parsons asserted that there were two dimensions to societies: instrumental and expressive. By this he meant that there are qualitative differences between kinds of **social interaction**.

He observed that people can have personalized and formally detached relationships based on the roles that they play. The characteristics that were associated with each kind of interaction he called the **pattern variables**.

An interaction can be characterized by one identifier of each contrastive pair:

- Affectivity versus Affective neutrality
- Self-orientation versus Collectivity-orientation
- Universalism versus Particularism
- Ascription versus Achievement
- Specificity versus Diffuseness

Further, feminist theory criticized each approach for the neglect of the sexual division of labour and the role of gender inequalities in capitalist modernity. Postmodern sociologists have emphasized the possibility of dedifferentiation as well as hyperdifferentiation, which are beyond the scope of this lecture.

**Social Stratification**

The more complex societies are, the more unequally they tend to distribute their scarce resource. The unequal distribution of scarce resources leads to **social stratification**, meaning that the society is divided into a number of strata or layers. Stratified societies use a system of ranking according to:

- **Wealth** or how much of the societal resources a person owns;
- **Prestige** or the degree of honour a person’s position in society evokes; and
- **Power** or the degree to which a person can direct others as a result of the preceding factors.

**Wealth**, which includes **income** and **property**, is an element of **social class**, whereas **prestige** is an element of **status**. To begin with, **class**, **status** and **power** are important dimensions of stratification. That is, stratification systems are analysed by looking at each of these phenomena.

Stratification occurs in every society that has produced a surplus. A society that produces no surplus provides a little opportunity to acquire wealth or prestige and the power based on them. Thus, stratification is intimately related to economics because the layering of people into social
levels boils down to attempts to answer the question: **who gets what, and why?** That is, how shall the scarce resources in the societies be distributed and for what reason? Different societies (political regimes) answer these questions differently, according to these economic systems. Consequently, their stratification systems vary.

**Dimensions of Stratification**

We have discussed in the last lecture that the basis of all stratification systems is ranking of people according to their possession of things that are scarce and, therefore, highly prized. These scarce resources are popularly categorized as wealth, prestige and power, or in more sociological terms, *class, status* and *power*. It is according to these dimensions that people are assigned a rank in society and relegated to a stratum with others who are ranked similarly.

**Class**

All complex societies are characterized by some kind of structured social *inequality* (or *stratification* system). The totality of *social stratification* will made up of a number of different elements that will vary in their importance between different societies.

**Class** makes a significant contribution to structured social inequality in contemporary societies. However, it is a multifaceted concept with a variety of different meanings. There is no absolute definition of the concept, or any single absolute way of measuring it. Nevertheless, questions of both definition and measurement have been endlessly contested over the years. Broadly, **three dimensions of class** may be identified:

(a) The economic;
(b) The cultural; and
(c) The political

The **economic dimension** has a focus on patterns and explanations of material inequality.

The **cultural dimension** focuses on lifestyle, social behaviour and hierarchies of prestige.

The **political dimension** addresses the role of classes and class action, in political, social and economic change.

Common to all sociological conceptions of class is the argument that social and economic inequalities are not natural or divinely ordained, but rather emerge as a consequence of social construction of human behaviour.

Modern ideas of class are inextricably associated with the development of capitalist industrialism. The development of capitalism was accompanied by the emergence of the **two conflicting classes** identified by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as the *bourgeoisie* (the owners and controllers of capital or the means of production) and the industrial working class or *proletariat* (those without capital or access to productive resources who were forced to sell their labour in order to survive). This does not mean that industrial capitalism was ever a two-class
society, as many other groupings, distinguished by a variety of relationships to both production and the market, have always existed in capitalist societies. For example, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx identifies (in addition to the proletariat) finance, landholding and industrial capital (different fractions of the capitalist class) as well as the peasantry, the petite bourgeoisie (shopkeepers and small owners of private capital), and the lumpenproletariat. Thus, Marx defined class in economic and political terms, and cultures and ideologies were held to be largely determined by class processes.

A key issue relating to class (deriving largely, but not entirely, from the work of Marx) is that of class identity or consciousness. Marx argued that, as different classes had conflicting interests, deriving from their position in relation to production and markets, these interests would find their expression in political action. Indeed, Marx saw class conflict as the major driving force of social change. In preindustrial (feudal) societies, the dominant class was the feudal aristocracy, whose power and authority was challenged by the rise of the industrial bourgeoisie. The conflict between these classes resulted in the emergence of capitalism. In capitalist society, Marx argued, the proletariat (or working class) assumed the role of the revolutionary class. He argued that the bourgeoisie exploited the proletariat via the extraction of the surplus value created by their labour. Marx predicted that the conflict brought about by growth of class consciousness and action amongst the proletariat (its transcending of a ‘class-in-itself’ to ‘class-for-itself’), together with the weaknesses engendered by successive crises of capitalism, would eventually lead to the victory of the proletariat and their allies and transformative social change. These changes would usher in first socialism, then communism.

The work of Max Weber has also been influential (*Class, Status and Party* [trans. 1940]). Like Marx, Weber emphasized the economic dimension of class. However, besides property ownership (Marx’s major axis of class differentiation), Weber also emphasized the significance of market situations. These included individual skills and qualifications, the possession of which will result in enhanced life chances as compared with those groups possessing neither property nor skills. Weber’s account of class, however, was radically different from that of Marx in that it was not linked to any theory of history and, although Weber recognized the likelihood and persistence of class conflict, he did not see such conflicts as necessarily leading to radical social change. Weber also identified the independent significance of social status (social honour or prestige), that is, hierarchical systems of cultural differentiation that identify particular persons, behaviour and lifestyles as superior or inferior, more or less worthy. Weber identified class and social status as different bases for claims to material resources.

Subsequently many sociologists have insisted on the analytical separation of the two concepts: class and social status. On the one hand, the class concept, it is argued, describes the relationships giving rise to inequalities; it is a relational concept. Hierarchies of prestige or status, on the other, only describe the outcomes of underlying class processes, as gradational class schemes. However, we should understand that although analytically class and status are distinct concepts, there are difficulties in separating them empirically.
Status

The term, ‘social status’ may be used in three analytical contexts with quite different meanings. In the analysis of social structure and differentiation, social status refers to:

(a) A position in social relations (for example, student, parent or teacher) that is socially recognized and normatively regulated. This generic usage is often contrasted with a more specific one, associated with sociological studies of inequalities and meaning.

(b) A hierarchical position in a vertical social order, an overall social rank, standing and social worth. In this context, individual statuses are associated with privileges and discriminations.

(c) Finally, in contemporary studies of social stratification, especially those inspired by Weber, social status refers to an aspect of hierarchical location in the social order derived from established cultural conventions (traditional beliefs and popular creeds). It is contrasted with class (market position in the economic order) and party (authority or command position in the political / organizational order). In this Weberian context, hierarchical status positions reflect the unequal conventional distribution of honour (esteem) and the accompanying life chances, while class positions reflect unequal distribution of market endowments and the accompanying life chances. The occupants of these positions form status groups characterized by common lifestyles, tastes, social proximity and intermarriage.

In Edward Shills’ view (Centre and Periphery, 1975), all societies engender status inequalities, and these inequalities reflect distance from the centre which represents the shared value standards. This echoes Emile Durkheim’s proposition that status represents a distance from “the sacred” – the symbolic representations of society. This link with the sacred gives strong legitimacy to status distinctions. Status group members reinforce these distinctions by claiming monopolies over certain privileges, titles, occupational roles and styles of dress.

The penetration of traditional status distinctions intro the fabric of modern society was the main theme of Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class (1899). Social esteem enjoyed by the upper strata, argued Veblen, did not depend on their wealth or power; it had to be earned through conventional social practices, in particular the avoidance of vulgar forms of labour, especially services, engagement in “vicarious leisure” and conspicuous consumption. Earning and cultivating esteem was a task pursued by families, rather than individuals.

Power

The most significant of the controversies that took place among sociologists and political scientists in the 20th century around of power concern, expressly or otherwise, concerns the definition of power offered at the beginning of the 20th century by Max Weber. In Economy and Society (1922), that definition characterizes power as “the chance of a [wo]man or a group of [wo]men to realize their own will in a communal [collective] action against the resistance of their who are participating in the action”.

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In fact, some expressed or implied elements of this definition were not widely considered controversial. In particular, it was generally agreed that one should think of (social) power not as a substance but as a relationship – a point implied in Weber’s reference to both parties’ ‘participation’ in collective action. In other terms, power is not something to be held, so to speak, in one’s hand or pocket, but as something obtaining between two parties, such as that A may hold it vis-à-vis B, but not vis-à-vis C.

In other words, **power** is defined as the ability to carry out one’s wishes in spite of resistance. It is the ability to get other people to do what one wants them to do, with or without their consent. Stratification based on power is, in Weber’s view, essentially political rather than economic. In fact, Weber used the term **political class** or **party** to mean an elite, a group that is more powerful than other groups in society. Power is exercised in all social systems, from the simplest to the most complex.

As applied to stratification, power may be divided into personal power and social power. **Personal power** is the freedom of individuals to direct their own lives in a way they themselves choose, without much interference. Such freedom often goes with great wealth. **Social power** is the ability to make decisions that affect entire communities or even the whole society. Social power may be exercised legitimately, with the consent of the members of society. In this case, it is called **authority**. Parents, teachers and the government all represent different levels of authority. Social power may also be exercised illegitimately, that is, without the official and ethical approval of society.

Power is such an important dimension of stratification because it affects the manner in which society’s goods and services are distributed. It is deeply interwoven with the other dimensions such as class and status. High-status individuals have little trouble attaining positions of power, either in government, the professions or corporate and banking circles. In turn, those in positions of power can control decision making in such a way that events are favourable to them. In traditional, non-industrial societies, power is often held by a small elite, which the majority of people are relatively powerless. In industrial societies, however, power is spread among many people, largely as a result of universal suffrage and the generally better living standard of the majority of the population.

Weber’s expression ‘**chance**’ entails two further plausible, closely related characteristics of power:

(a) First, power refers to a probability of complete assurance of a given party’s success.

(b) Secondly, power is always potential because it refers not so much to the doing of something (to the actual “production of effects”, proposed by others as an alternative definition of power) but to the capacity of doing something, of producing effects if and when one chooses.

In other words, power does not need to be exercised (by overcoming opposition or otherwise) in order to exist. Paradoxically, the exercise of power may consume it and/or expose it, when actually brought to bear, to the risk of being found wanting, of failing to do its number as it were.
Rather, power is at its most powerful when those subject to practise their subjection to it without its being actually exercised, when it operates through the power subjects’ memory of past exercises of it or their imagination of future ones, when it needs to be at most symbolically represented rather than actually put into action.

References


Questions

1. Critically examine Karl Marx’s contribution to the concept of social differentiation.

2. Explain the functionalist perspective of social differentiation.

3. What is meant by social stratification?

4. What are the different dimensions of social stratification?

5. Explain Max Weber’s perspective of social stratification.

6. What is the significance of ‘power’ in determining the social strata?