From Marx to Warner

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Class and Stratification Under Scrutiny

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A friend in need is a friend indeed.

The author got to know the entire depth of that adage thanks to Zora Wencel-Kowalska. It was in his dark hour of the utmost need that she gave him the helping hand that veritably saved him.

If this book is a tribute to her, it still is just a minuscule portion of the debt I owe to her.

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INTRODUCTION

The initial idea for writing this book has come from the author's reflection on the widespread term the “middle class”. Upon scrutiny it turns out that, contrary to its verbal guise, the term refers in fact to a social stratum rather than a class. This follows from a range of characteristics peculiar to all stratification approaches as distinct from class perspectives, the hierarchical configuration being but the most apparent one. Thus, there is a logical chain of reasoning involved here: an initial reflection upon the content of a well-known concept leads to an analysis of its theoretical background. And the present book is precisely an outcome of an investigation of the latter. In other words, it comprises an overview of a representative body of class and stratification theories. From this point of view, although the book may not have been written as a textbook, it clearly has a definite potential for classroom use. What might complicate the matter is, ironically, the book's likely merit lying in its underlying theoretical framework, which-though drawn on Marx, Weber, and to a lesser extent-Simmel and Parsons-is original and in many key respects unique to the present author. Dropping this coquetry, one could argue, of course, that it is this undergirding analytic framework that gives the entire study a high degree of coherence and consistency.

CHAPTER I

CONCEPTUAL ASYMMETRY

Among the available perspectives on social differentiation there obtains indeed a certain asymmetry-many class approaches by name turn out, upon scrutiny, fit into an alternative framework of social stratification. Interestingly, while it is only seldom that one can come across what is in actual fact a class approach, but couched in stratification terms, the reverse is quite often the case.

This fact by itself, however, does not, of course, transform Warner, Parsons or any other exponent of stratification, employing the language of class into a class theorists in the proper sense of the word. The former, for example, states: "no teacher teaches us the hard facts of our social-class system.

It is time we learn all of the basic facts of our status system and learn them through systematic, explicit training which will teach at least the adult student much of what he needs to know about our status order, how it operates. How he fits into the system, and what he should do to improve his position or make his present one more tolerable. This book presents basic materials about social class in America, tells how to identify the several levels, and describes the movement from lower levels to higher ones" (Warner, Meeker, Eels 1960).

In a fairly typical, alas, textbook definition class is described as "a ranked group within a stratified society characterized by achieved status and considerable social mobility" (Brym 2003).

To make the matter worse, the above definition not only reduces the concept of class to that of stratum, but additionally supplements it with the criterion of high social mobility, which may or may not pertain to the particular socio-historical class structures. In feudalism, for example, such mobility was very low, which does not at all alter the fact that the feudal society was a class one. Interestingly enough, the source mentioned above in another definition comes to the same conclusion, as it defines "Open Class System" as a "stratification system that facilitates social mobility,

with individual achievement and personal merit determining social rank" (Brym 2003).

It only adds to the existing confusion that sometimes the reverse thing happens, that is, scholars subscribing to the stratification perspective, actually speak the language of class; a case in point is the following passage by two Greek researchers: "three main strata: The upper stratum is represented by the most prosperous peasants, large storekeepers or merchants and professionals, like doctors, teachers, governmental officials etc.

In the middle stratum, there is to be found the bulk of farm owners, small storekeepers and a limited number of skilled workers who may also live in the village.

Finally, the lower stratum consists of the landless farm labourers and the "outcasts" of the village (Mouzelis and Attalides 1979:183)."

The alleged strata are in fact, true, not particularly precisely defined, social classes.

Another researcher refers to her subject interchangeably, as if both terms involved had the same content, which in fact is not the case: "Results from hierarchical linear models indicate that differentiation has a democratizing effect on access to higher education: it increases overall enrolment as well as decreases the gap in enrolment between different social strata. Moreover, differentiation does not disproportionately divert students from less privileged family backgrounds to 4-year institutions—it actually diminishes the role of social class in access to 4-year colleges and universities" (Roksa 2008).

Considering that "socioeconomic background (SES) SES is measured as a standardized composite of parent's education, occupation and income" (Roksa 2008), the former label is proper, while the latter is not. This kind of approach is common, which does not mean proper, all the more so that it often involves logical fallacies, as in the following case in which class has been defined through income, so that the author's contentions in the later part of the quotation make little sense, being analytic propositions, as opposed to synthetic; "the primary measure of class I adapt in this study is income. Given that some other scholars see a tighter connection between education and class, I also consider educational attainment" (Landry 1987). After all, to compare income-based and education-based definitions is like comparing apples with oranges.

Yet another theorist fails to notice his statement contains a contradiction-he first offers a-fairly correct-definition of stratification as composed of "strata" only to give a definition of class that is indistinguishable from that of social strata:

> Social stratification refers to the division of a society into layers (or strata) whose occupants have unequal access to social opportunities and rewards.
>
> People in the top strata enjoy power, prosperity, and prestige that are not available to other members of society; people in the bottom strata endure penalties that other members of society escape. In a stratified society, inequality is part of the social structure and passes from one generation to the next (Long 2013). What is a Class?
>
> People who occupy the same layer of the socioeconomic hierarchy are known as a social class (Bassis, 1990:216). According to Henslin (2004:192), a social class is a large group of people who rank closely to one another in wealth, power, and prestige. Henslin (1999:253) suggests that researches can assign people to various social classes based on objective criteria involving wealth, power, and prestige. Some objective indicators can include occupation, educational level, number of dependents, type of residence, infant mortality, and life expectancy rates.

What are, then the most crucial differences between strata and classes?

Differentia specifica of a class is the fact that it is a social group rooted in the economic structure, whereas, by definition, it is not necessarily the case as regards social strata.

With all their differences (which often are overplayed) the only two classical theories of class-Marxian and Weberian-share this basic insight that class is an economic concept. Therefore, Haller (1970) was off base, interpreting the Weberian revision of the basic Marxian model, as emphasizing "relationships among social units whose incumbents are unequal in wealth, power, or prestige … [variables that] constitute the minimum set of hierarchical inequalities which apparently discriminate among all peoples" (Haller 2004).

For his interpretation squeezes Weber's class theory into the straightjacket of stratification, which is totally inadmissible. Moreover, in another context the same researcher goes even further, extending his reductionist approach onto Marx: "the three content dimensions of status which appear to be universal are wealth, power and prestige, as consistent with the early

writings on stratification by classical sociologists (Marx & Weber, in particular)" (Haller 2004).

Thus, whilst social stratification, as even its name suggests, always forms a hierarchy, interclass relations are more complex and hence it is only seldom that a class structure may take a ladder-like shape. This much is pointed out by Wright: "Both Marx and Weber adopt relational concepts of class. Neither defines classes simply as nominal levels on some gradational hierarchy. For both, classes are derived from an account of systematic interactions of social actors situated in relation to each other. Classes for both Weber and Marx are thus not primarily identified by quantitative names like upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, and lower, but by qualitative names like capitalists and workers, debtors and creditors" (2002). This claim, however, falls short of an open admission that this gradational or nominal approach is not a class one at all, for it pertains to social stratification, as defined, in a typical formulation, as follows: "even the most egalitarian societies have some hierarchical structure, and in all democracies there are distinctions on the basis of education, income, occupation, cultural differences, and social mores related to prior schooling and membership in faith-based and many other institutions of society. Inevitably, some of these are perceived as having higher social standing than others; thus "social stratification" is a useful term to describe them" (Dictionary of Public Health 2013). And the importance of the distinction between social strata and classes cannot be over-estimated, given how often it is not observed: e.g., "Class is no longer simply a vertical ranking linked to capital and a system of production in some way" (Dorling 2013), as if it could ever be brought down to such a ranking. Similarly, the essential distinction noted above is completely erased in the following statement: "theories of social inequality as well as its more modern derivatives explain themes which all display an interest in the vertical nature of social class or strata and the relation of individuals or groups to differences in property and its cost, including the wages derived from the property of labor power. The result of the basic premise of theories of inequality in industrial society is that social hierarchies in the final analysis always are generated and legitimized with reference to the productive process and its organization. This implies that inequality becomes directly or indirectly a function of the relation of the individual to work or capital and its benefits in the form of monetary income, interest, rent and profit. The identity of individuals is mediated or even determined by their relation to the work process. Social strata and classes form in the same manner. In short, as both Marxist and non-Marxist approaches suggest, industrial society is still primarily a society of

labor. This suggests strongly, to social scientists at least in the case of the analysis of social inequality in some contemporary societies, that social hierarchies still are shaped predominantly by class rather than other forms of social cleavage" (Stehr 1999).

And even well-known Marxist authors can, by applying the term "class" in relation to what actually constitutes stratification, legitimise the latter confusing usage: "'Class' is also allowed to be used with limited application when it is part of the holy trinity of race, gender, and class. Used in that way, it is reduced to a demographic trait related to life style, education level, and income level. In forty years of what was called 'identity politics' and 'culture wars,' class as a concept was reduced to something of secondary importance. All sorts of "leftists" told us how we needed to think anew, how we had to realism that class was not as important as race or gender or culture.

I was one of those who thought these various concepts should not be treated as being mutually exclusive of each other. In fact, they are interactive. Thus racism and sexism have always proved functional for class oppression. Furthermore, I pointed out (and continue to point out), that in the social sciences and among those who see class as just another component of 'identity politics', the concept of class is treated as nothing more than a set of demographic traits" (Parenti 2011). Interestingly enough, though, for all his criticism toward the said understanding of class, Parenti does not go as far as to call into question the very practice of using the term concerned in the context of the framework reproved. The reason may lie in certain shortcomings to his own position. Parenti formulates his criticism from the perspective of Marxist relational framework, using, however, the imprecise term "the relation to the means of production" which may refer to an ownership relation, but also to, e.g., the division of labour couched in technical terms. The latter would suggest an approach much closer to Goldthorpe than Marx. By contrast, from the perspective of ownership, and more precisely ownership of labour power, one can theorise some key aspects of impact of ethnic origin, sex, age, etc. on the economic structure, in which, recall, classes are rooted. In the context of the process of hiring, which in our terms should be recast as leasing, one could distinguish two basic types of labour power: one can get a job on the basis of certain objective, independent of a given specific context criteria, such as personality tests (of course, we are fully aware that the aforementioned "objectivity" is very, very contingent, and psychological tests may well reflect some Western stereotypes and biases and thereby favour, say, Caucasians over individuals of other races, but we

leave at this point such considerations aside for the sake of argument), which could be conceptualised in terms of universalistic labour power. By contrast, other prospective employees become them in actuality by virtue of personal connections, and their personal ascriptive characteristics, such as the colour of skin, sex, or what you. These individuals could be said to hold an alternative type of labour power-a particularistic one. The contrast in question is nicely captured by a study whose authors report: "the analysis of personnel policies among our sample firms reveals two distinct models. Some firms adopt a performance model, whereby managers are hi red through formal channels, they are assessed regularly and rewarded, promoted, and dismissed on the basis of objective measures of performance. Other firms instead adopt a fidelity model of managerial talent development: they hire managers on the basis of personal or family contacts, they do not assess the managers' performance formally, and managers' rewards are based on the quality of their relationship with the firm's owners.

The analysis also reveals that non-family firms and multinationals are more likely to adopt the performance model, whereas family firms and firms that operate exclusively in the domestic market tend to adopt the fidelity model" (Bori et al. 2010).

Positive or negative discrimination on the basis of some ascribed traits may, sure enough, work in relation to many other aspects of work: job promotion, pay policy, etc. So, the notion of labour power as an object of economic ownership enables us to capture some key channels in which the factors mentioned earlier, and other unmentioned at that point, are manifested in the context of economic structure; it is clear that not only there is no opposition between the notion of class and those other concepts, but conversely, it is the former notion that allows for a scientific, empirical investigation of links between the latter factors and the economy. More broadly, this was just an example of how one could inquire into the societal efficacy of the above-mentioned factors, so often and so wrongly pitted against class; Age, gender, and race/ethnicity have long been regarded as the holy trinity of status distinctions that intersect with, reinforce, and sometimes undercut class-based distinctions (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Parsons, 1942; Wright & Perrone, 1977). The inadequacy of Parenti's approach is manifested precisely in his one-sided treatment of the relation between class, race and sex. He highlights in this context the concept of interaction, but interactionism is not dialectics; from the latter viewpoint, it is not simply that one has two factors influencing each other. Nor, too, the relation in question could be rendered

by means of such concepts as determination in the last instance, over-determination and others popularised notably by Louis Althusser and his followers, which-owing most often to their formalism-are unable to reflect the all-important process of structural causation. This cannot be brought down to any mechanical queue of "instances" which one after another come to the fore, occupying the position of over-determining forces. This is not dialectics but its parody. The point is that to explore, for example, race as both a causative force and one that is itself affected by definite societal structures one may not treat the former in isolation from the economy and its societal overlay, i.e. a class structure. As demonstrated in another book (Tittenbrun 2011a), the so-called primacy of the economy does not consist in it being some all-powerful and all-pervasive force, which at that maintains this capacity irrespective of its historical context. By contrast, what is indeed particular, pivotal position of the economic structure means simply that no phenomenon or process in a society can be scientifically examined without its reference to the former. This does not mean, mind you, anything like reduction; it is just a methodological directive-under laid, to be sure, by definite ontological assumptions regarding the architecture of social reality, not to mention epistemological premises. The distinction discussed above finds its confirmation in what for many will be an unlikely source, namely chaos theory championed by many postmodernist theorists (the truth of the matter is that the author of "Dialectics of Nature" would be first to embrace this analytic perspective as being a modern articulation of precisely the very dialectical approach Engels, Marx, Simmel and many others pursued so successfully). William Johnson and Michael Ornstein, (1980). compared several different approaches to the scanning for class dynamics in complex data sets. "Those who used conventional measures of class standing (education, income, occupation, self-identification and such) were not able to locate such basins of attraction in national survey data. Those using other parameters (the ownership and control of production facilities, control over new capital investment, and control of the labour process itself), three researchers (Carchedi, Poulantzas and Wright) were able to find hidden attractors while those using conventional measures above, were not" (Young 1994).

This result is all the more remarkable that the theories chosen as an alternative to social stratification are poles apart from being perfect, as is demonstrated in the present book.

To revert to the aforementioned comments on the distinction between class and stratification approaches, it is paradoxical that Wright's (who in the

meantime has managed to show up also in Young's discussion) own work illustrates how in the absence of a solid theoretical foundation, verbal objections to the so-called gradational approach, matter little, as in practice their author himself invokes precisely this kind of viewing social differentiation, laying out "the hierarchy, with capitalists and managers at the top", followed by "A historically large and relatively stable middle class, anchored In an expansive and flexible system of higher education and technical training connected to jobs requiring credentials of various sorts, but whose security and future prosperity is now uncertain; A working class which once was characterized by a relatively large unionized segment with a standard of living and security similar to that of the middle class, but which now largely lacks these protections; A poor and precarious segment of the working class, characterized by low wages and relatively insecure employment, subjected to unconstrained job competition in the labour market, and with minimal protection from the state; A marginalized, impoverished part of the population, without the skills and education needed for jobs that would enable them to live above the poverty line, and living in conditions which make it extremely difficult to acquire those skills" (Wright 2009:109).

If we were to treat originality as the paramount virtue of a scholarly work, then Wright's proposal does not fare on that account particularly well; even in this book at least several class schemata have been presented that at first glance appear no different from the classification outlined above.

And in a similar vein as in those other contexts, one could note that the concept of precariat does not seem to be particularly well-founded, and in general, the all-important notion of labour power as an object of ownership receives no attention at all, which is especially striking in the context of formulations about "credentials" as a supposed class criterion.

Regarding the definition of "socio-economic status", commonly used in the stratification literature, Bollen, Glanville, and Stecklov (2001:157) noted, "(SES) refers to the position of individuals, families, households, or other aggregates on one or more dimensions of stratification. These dimensions include income, education, prestige, wealth, or other aspects of standing that members of society deem salient". Put another way, there are, broadly speaking, two basic types of stratification systems: unidimensional and multidimensional ones. In the former case there is only one criterion of distinguishing particular social strata, be it prestige, access to power (cf. Lenski 1966; Bendix and Lipset 1967), income (Gangl 2005; Iceland, Bauman 2007; Morris, Western 1999; Alderson,

Nielsen 2002; Esping-Andersen 2007; Firebaugh 2000; Milanovic 2006; Hardin 2006), wealth (cf. Angle 1986), education level (Breen, Jonsson 2005), occupation (Handel 2003; Kenworthy 2008; Blau, Duncan 1967: Breiger 1981; Lyn, Vaughn, Ensel 1981) etc. (cf. e.g. Farkas 2003), whereas the latter structure is based on a mixture of criteria, such as in the following study of outdoor recreation applying a multiple hierarchy stratification perspective conceiving of socio-economic status (SES), in terms such as the level of education, level of income and occupational status (Bultina, Field 2001) or in the case of Gilbert (2011) on no less than ten discrete variables.

In both instances it is possible to discern such groups throughout the entire society. A case in point is Warner and his collaborators' statement to the effect of that. "Those who occupy co-ordinating positions acquire power and prestige. They do so because their actions partly control the behavior of the individuals who look to them for direction. Within this simple control there is simple power. Those who exercise such power either acquire prestige directly from it or have gained prestige from other sources sufficient to be raised to a co-ordinating position. For example, among many primitive peoples a simple fishing expedition may be organised so that the men who fish and handle each boat are under the direction of one leader. The efforts of each boat are directed by the leader and, in turn, each boat is integrated into the total enterprise by its leader's taking orders from his superior. The same situation prevails in a modern factory. Small plants with a small working force and simple problems possess a limited hierarchy, perhaps no more than an owner who bosses all the workers. But a large industrial enterprise, with complex activities and problems, like General Motors, needs an elaborate hierarchy of supervision. The position in a great industrial empire which integrates and co-ordinates all the positions beneath it throughout all the supervising levels down to the workers has great power and prestige. The same holds true for political, religious, educational, and other social institutions; the more complex the group and the more diverse the functions and activities, the more elaborate its status system is likely to be" (Warner, Meeker, Eels 1960:9). The authors believe it is possible to speak of "the stratification of employees, of children on school records, of names on a customer list, or of subscribers to a newspaper or magazine" (Warner, Meeker, Eels 1960:9).

Social stratification can be discerned in each and every walk of life, sports included, as an article on "Baseball's middle class" testifies; its author's reasoning clearly resembles the notion of median typical of the mainstream middle-class approach: "A usually high number of teams are

hovering around the 500 mark. [...]The Washington Nationals are at the top of the middle class" (Bernhardt 2014).

Radical as it may seem, the above case is small potatoes compared to the subsequent example, concerning a study conducted at the Mpala Research Center, Kenya that "is home to more than 20 large mammal species, which can be divided, inter alia, along the key lines of social class-the reader is told-whereby "individuals can be subdivided into three distinct social classes: territorial males (T), bachelor males (B), and nursery herd members (N)" (Estes, 1974). These classes denote age, sex, and behavior, but also reflect intraspecific gradations in territoriality, for example, territorial males defend patches of habitat against other males. This is not to deny, sure enough, sometimes elaborate social organisation that can be observed in many animal species, but the crucial question is: what cognitive advantages, as opposed to confusion, are to be derived from the terminology common to the zoologist, Marx and Weber? The question imposes itself all the more forcefully that one of the articles invoked above as a source of this peculiar approach bears the title 'stratum identification..." [emphasis-J.T], which in its own way illustrates the purported affinity of both approaches concerned that in the present study is called into question, or more precisely, reduced to the domain of language illegitimately appropriated by stratification approaches.

To revert, for a change, to human populations, Bollen et al. (2001) identified a number of problems arising from the measurement of SES across a wide range of studies. These problems included a lack of consensus in terms of the conceptualisation of SES, a lack of clarity as to the underlying structure and dimensionality of SES, and the fact that various measures of SES have been used interchangeably across studies.

The result of this ambiguity is that variations in SES have been measured in a large number of ways, including educational achievement, occupational standing, social class, socioeconomic status, income, exposure to poverty, and exposure to adverse life events such as unemployment or single parenthood (for discussion of these issues cf. e.g. Bollen et al., 2001; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Braveman et al., 2005; Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). Furthermore, exposure to social inequality has been assessed using individual level, household level, and community level measures (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The result of these strategies is that the literature on social inequality and other outcomes has been based on a wide spectrum of measures that have been collected in different ways and for different purposes, but which have been used more

or less interchangeably to describe social and economic stratification and its effects on life course outcomes" (Fergusson 2008).

The aforementioned candid confession on the part of a proponent of a given research strand cogently shows how flawed methodologically and conceptually it is; after all, to include social class in stratification research is to blur the distinction between the latter and the alternative approach to social differentiation. On the other hand, the above SES' description reveals its circular character. Small wonder, therefore, that 'SES was dismissed because by 1970 it had become a buzzword. Among its various meanings, as an index of household consumption it is really a measure of wealth. In another definition of SES, consistent with an early SES index developed by Sewell (1940), it encompasses "material possessions, cultural possessions, and social participation" (Haller & Saraiva, 1973:2, 8). This definition of SES works as a summary of all three content dimensions of status, "accounting for practically all the common variance of indicators of wealth, prestige and power" (Haller, 1970:471). Thus, SES is not an additional content variable.

An instance of a flawed approach to multiple social stratifications is a study of social stratification in China. Hsu notes that:

> the social-stratification system in China has gone through shifts and turns. During different eras, different values and weights are applied to the political, economic, social, and human capitals by the government to establish the logic and justification of China's stratification of class and status of the time. The changing matrix of valuation and interactions of these categories of capitals in practice, in turn, shape the particular characteristics of the social-stratification system in correlation to China's changing political climates. (Wang 2009).

This statement is misleading, since historicity is precisely what is missing in the author's account:

> Hsu distinguishes three shifts in the China's social-stratification system.
>
> In imperial China, the cultural narratives propagated the high value of human capital as the definition of class and status. Rooted in Confucian meritocracy.
>
> A system in which advancement is based on individual ability or achievement developed.
>
> Education was explicitly linked to qualities such as wisdom, righteousness, morality, and contribution to society. Scholars were an integral part of the

> government and had a significant amount of political power in a paternalistic policy or practice of treating or governing people in a fatherly manner, especially by providing for their needs without giving them rights or responsibilities. Education was intertwined with social and economic capitals, the construct of social hierarchy during this time was dominated by human capital in principal and practice.
>
> In Mao Zedong's socialist era, political capital was elevated to dominate China's social-stratification system with the intended devaluation […] of economic and human capital. Embodied in socialist virtuocracy, economic capital was associated with capitalism and decadence, the staunch enemy of socialism. Human capital or intellects were deemed politically weak-minded yet economically indispensable, whereas party membership and positions within the party hierarchy defined social prestige and status. Banked on equality and asceticism, rejection of bodily pleasures through sustained self-denial and self-mortification, with the objective of strengthening spiritual life as the institutions advocated, China's party elites became the inexplicit social and economic elites when many took advantage of their privileged status-even though these were unintended consequences of elevating political capital while suppressing economic and social capitals.
>
> Hsu contends that the current social-stratification system combines human capital with economic capital as the definition of class and status while devaluing political capital. This stratification system is similar to none, but an ingenious hybrid of all from the past. It blends elements from discourses of Confucian meritocracy (human capital), socialist virtuocracy (political capital), and capitalist modernity (economic capital).
>
> […] Social actors who garner both human and economic capitals are revered as the new elites.
>
> The new social-stratification system in Harbin is fundamentally different from Confucian meritocracy, which combines human capital with political capital; it is fundamentally different from Socialist virtuosity as well which rewards political capital alone. The new elites and role models under the new system are social actors with advanced education and have engaged in businesses that benefit ordinary people and raise the status of China in the world; they are largely divorced from politics and let the government manage and ascertain that the economy is functioning properly. (Wang 2009)

Contrary to the above claims, the study concerned is deeply ahistorical, which is first and foremost manifested in the choice of the concept of capitals to account for China's social differentiation not only in the modern era, but also in relation to socialism and ancient China that

represented the Asiatic socio-economic formation. Whilst in the first instance it can be admitted that the issue is only the conceptualisation of purportedly peculiar characteristics of China's capitalist system, not the very existence of that system, in the remaining cases such a question is obviously rhetoric. In a word, if one looked for a proof of absurdity of those immensely and undeservedly popular Bourdieusian categories, this study would perfectly fit. In her ill-conceived striving for a universal theory of stratification in China, the author has not reached neither that goal nor a more modest one of depicting social differentiation in one specific medium-sized Chinese city.

CHAPTER II

PITIRIM SOROKIN'S THEORY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND MOBILITY

A good example of the above-mentioned multivariate approach to stratification is provided by Pitirim A. Sorokin's theory (1959). Social stratification, to Sorokin, means "the differentiation of a given population into hierarchically superposed classes." Such stratification, he held, is a permanent characteristic of any organized social group.

Thus, so far so consistent with our characterisation of stratification theory, since, as suggested in the text, hierarchy and universality are two typical attributes of those theories. Going further, we learn that Sorokin's framework is based on multiple foundations.

Stratification may be based on economic criteria-for example, when one focuses attention upon the differentials between the wealthy and the poor. But societies or groups are also politically stratified when their social ranks are hierarchically structured with respect to authority and power. If, however, the members of a society are differentiated into various occupational groups and some of these occupations are deemed more honourable than others, or if occupations are internally divided between those who give orders and those who receive orders, then we deal with occupational stratification. Though there may be other concrete forms of stratification, of central sociological importance are economic, political, and occupational stratification.

Sociological investigation must proceed to pay attention to the height and the profile of stratification pyramids. Of how many layers is it composed? Is its profile steep, or does it slope gradually?

The above sentence reveals a further characteristic present in many approaches to stratification; lacking anything like solid theoretical underpinning, they often use an inconsistent terminology, blurring the differences between the various dimensions to stratification or, conversely, failing to see their affinity or even identity, which generates some

superfluous distinctions-for instance, in the above case, occupations are, implicitly, deemed extra-economic in character.

Be that as it may, according to Sorokin, whether one studies economic, political, or occupational stratification, one must always be attentive to two distinct phenomena: the rise or decline of a group as a whole and the increase or decrease of stratification within a group. In the first case we deal with increases of wealth, power, or occupational standing of social groups, as when we talk of the decline of the aristocracy or the rise of the bourgeoisie; in the second, we are concerned with the increase or decrease of the height and steepness of the stratification pyramid in regard to wealth, power, or occupational prestige within groups-for example, when we say that the American Black population now has a higher stratification profile than it had at the turn of the century.

In contrast to evolutionary and "progressive" thought, and in tune with his overall view of the course of human history, Sorokin argued that no consistent trend toward either the heightening or the flattening of stratificational pyramids can be discerned. Instead, all that can be observed is ceaseless fluctuation.

At times, differences between the poor and the rich may be reduced through the impact of equalitarian forces, but at other times un-egalitarian tendencies will again assert themselves. Or at one point democratic participation will reduce differences in political power, while at another aristocratic and dictatorial politics will successfully increase the height of the political pyramid. In similar ways, some groups decline and others rise in ceaseless fluctuation.

Exterior features of the architecture of social structures having been sketched, Sorokin proceeds to summarize their inner construction, to wit the character and disposition of the floors, the elevators, and the staircases that lead from one story to another; the ladders and accommodations for climbing up and going down from story to story (this metaphor being almost as characteristic of the stratification literature as an even more widespread image of a ladder). This brings him to the concrete details of his study of social mobility.

Social mobility is understood as the transition of people from one social position to another. There are two types of social mobility, horizontal and vertical.

The first concerns movements from one social position to another situated on the same level, as in a movement from Baptist to Methodist affiliation, or from work as a foreman with Ford to similar work with Chrysler. The second refers to transitions of people from one social stratum to one higher or lower in the social scale, as in ascendant movements from rags to riches or in the downward mobility of inept children of able parents.

Both ascending and descending movements occur in two principal forms: the penetration of individuals of a lower stratum into an existing higher one, and the descent of individuals from a higher social position to one lower on the scale; or the collective ascent or descent of whole groups relative to other groups in the social pyramid.

But-and this is what distinguished Sorokin's orientation from that of many contemporary students of stratification and mobility-his main focus was upon collective, not on individual phenomena. As he puts it, "The cases of individual infiltration into an existing higher stratum or of individuals dropping from a higher social layer into a lower one are relatively common and comprehensible. They need no explanation. The second form of social ascending and descending, "the rise and fall of groups, must be considered more carefully."

Groups and societies, according to Sorokin, may be distinguished according to their differences in the intensiveness and generality of social mobility.

There may be stratified societies in which vertical mobility is virtually nil and others in which it is very frequent. We must therefore be careful to distinguish between the height and profile of stratification, and the prevalence or absence of social mobility. In some highly stratified societies where the membranes between strata are thin, social mobility is very high. By contrast, other societies with various profiles and heights of stratification have hardly any stairs and elevators to allow members to pass from one floor to another, so that the strata are largely closed, rigidly separated, immobile, and virtually impenetrable. This acknowledgement of a high degree of historical variation marking different stratification systems must be regarded as a noteworthy merit to Sorokin's approach whose historicity in that sense compares favourably with many, if not most, other approaches to social stratification. In addition, assuming that there are no societies in which strata are absolutely closed and none where social mobility is absolutely free from obstacles, one must recognize that Sorokin's distinctions, even though stated too metaphorically, are of considerable heuristic value.

In regard to degrees of openness and closure, Sorokin holds to his usual position. No perpetual trend toward either increase or decrease of vertical mobility can be discerned in the course of human history; all that can be noticed are variations through geographical space and fluctuations in historical time.

Attempting to identify the channels of vertical mobility and the mechanisms of social selection and distribution of individuals within different social strata, Sorokin identifies the army, the church, the school, as well as political, professional, and economic organizations, as principal conduits of vertical social circulation (which classification finds itself, in a modified form, also in the functionalist theory of social stratification). They are the "sieves" that sift individuals who claim access to different social strata and positions. All these institutions are involved in social selection and distribution of the members of a society. They decide which people will climb and fall; they allocate individuals to various strata; they either open gates for the flow of individuals or create impediments to their movements.

Without minutely detailing the many ways in which Sorokin illustrates the operation of these institutions or the way in which he shows why at a given time certain stratification profiles have called for specific mechanisms of selection, we should take note, however, of what he considers a "permanent and universal" basis for inter-occupational stratification, namely: "The importance of an occupation for the survival and existence of a group as a whole", which again reveals another similarity to Moore and Davis' later functional theory of stratification.

The occupations that are considered most consequential in a society, Sorokin states, are those that "are connected with the functions of organization and control of a group".

Regarding the impact of actual rates of social mobility, as well as the ideology of social mobility, on modern societies, we find Sorokin offers a fresh approach in the light of current experience. Far from indulging in unalloyed enthusiasm about high degrees of social mobility, Sorokin, like Durkheim, was at pains to highlight it's both dysfunctional and its functional aspects. He stressed, among other things, the heavy price in mental strain, mental disease, cynicism, social isolation, and loneliness of individuals cut adrift from their social moorings. On the other hand, he also stressed the increase in tolerance and the facilitation of intellectual

life (as a result of discoveries and inventions) that were likely to occur with more frequency in highly mobile societies

Thus, it may be conceded that analyst of social stratification, social mobility, and related matters can still learn from Sorokin's work. It still remains a veritable storehouse of ideas. Above all "we need to take Sorokin's advice when he urges us to consider social mobility as a form of social exchange. Just as Levi-Strauss brought about a revolution in the study of kinship (stressing that marriage is to be seen as an exchange between elementary families), so Sorokin presents the innovative idea that social mobility does not primarily concern the placement of individuals but is to be understood as exchange between social groups" (Ridener 2002).

According to Sorokin, by fostering the circulation of individuals in social space, such exchange increases or decreases the specific weight and power of the groups and strata between which they move. "This central idea, if more fully elaborated, could be the impetus for a great deal of research in social stratification" (Ridener 2002).

The above-cited commentator is, sure enough, entitled to such a view, but the reader would be forgiven for failing to share this enthusiasm for introducing the plank of social exchange to social analysis. Unfortunately, there is no space here for a comprehensive critical discussion, but the interested reader should consult (Tittenbrun 2011a), as well as a later chapter on Homans in this book.

Anyway, what, according to Wright, is "the contrast between unidimensional and multidimensional perspectives on class and stratification" (1979) in actuality refers exclusively to stratification as opposed to class. It would be difficult to state as a general proposition that either of those perspectives is inherently superior to the other one. One-dimensional approaches can provide a good deal of factual knowledge concerning whether income or wealth distribution, etc., which may be taken advantage of within alternative perspectives, not sharing numerous shortcomings marking social stratification. Whilst the unidimensional framework could be accused of prioritising just one specific aspect of societal hierarchies, its alternative may fall victim of another deficiency-they can avoid arbitrariness, tied to the focus on a single parameter, but often at the expense of relative lucidity that in their case comes to be clouded by what is in effect a multifactorial approach, whose essential flaw consists in their anti-dialectical approach, which has little in common with such simple

enumerations of a number of mutually interacting factors, lacking any more sophisticated analytic underpinning.