

Theories of Social Stratification:

A number of theoretical approaches to social stratification have been put forward. Various theories of social stratification are discussed below.

Functionalist Theory:

Functionalists assure that there are certain basic needs or functional prerequisites which must be met for the survival of the society. They look to social stratification to see how far it meets these functional prerequisites.

They assure that the parts of society form an integrated whole and thus, examine the ways in which the social stratification system is integrated with other parts of the society. Functionalists maintain that certain degree of order and stability are essential for the operation of social system. They, therefore, want to consider how stratification systems help to maintain order and stability of society.

Functionalists are primarily concerned with the function of social stratification, with its contribution to the maintenance of society. Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis, Wilbert Moore are some of the prominent American sociologists who have developed functional theory of social stratification.

It has been contended by them that social stratification inevitably occurs in any complex society, particularly in an industrial society and it serves some 'Vital functions' in such societies. Social stratification is indispensable to any complex society, they say. This view is known as functionalist theory of social stratification.

Parsons argue that stratification system derive from common values. In Parsons' words, 'Stratification, in its valuational aspect, is the ranking of units in a social system, in accordance with common value system'. Thus, those who perform successfully in terms of society's values will be ranked highly and they will be likely to receive a variety of rewards.

They will be accorded high prestige. For example, if a society places a high value on bravery and generosity, as in the case of the Sioux Indians, those who exceed in terms of the qualities will receive a high rank in the stratification system. He also argues that since different societies have different value systems, the way of attaining a high position will vary from society to society.

It follows from Parson's argument that there is a general belief that stratification system are just, right and proper, since they are basically an expression of shared values. Thus, the

American business executive is seen to deserve his rewards because members of society place a high value on his skills and achievements.

It is not that there is no conflict between the highly rewarded and those who receive little reward. Parsons believes that this conflict is kept in check by the common value system which justifies the unequal distribution of rewards.

According to functionalists, the relationship between social groups in society is one of cooperation and interdependence. As no one group is self-sufficient it cannot meet the needs of its members. It must therefore, exchange goods and services with other groups. So the relationship between social groups is one of reciprocity. This relationship extends to the strata in a stratification system.

In societies with a highly specialised division of labour, some members will specialise in organisation and planning, others will follow their directives. Talcott Parsons argues that this inevitably leads to inequality in terms of power and prestige. Thus, those with the power to organise and coordinate the activities of others will have higher social status.

As with prestige differentials, Parsons argues that inequalities of power are based on shared values. Power is legitimate authority in a sense that is generally accepted as just and proper by members of society as a whole. The power of American business executive is seen as legitimate authority because it is used to further productivity, a goal shared by all members of society.

Parsons sees social stratification as both inevitable and functional for society. Power and Prestige inequalities are essential for the coordination and integration of a specialised division of labour. Without social inequalities, Parsons find it difficult to see how members of society could effectively cooperate and work together.

The most famous functionalist theory of stratification was first presented by Davis and Moore in 1945. According to them stratification exists in every known human society. They argue that all social system share certain functional prerequisite which must be met for survival and effective operation of the system.

One such functional prerequisite is effective role allocation and performance. Davis and Moore argue that all societies need some mechanism for ensuring effective role allocation and performance. This mechanism is social stratification. They see stratification as a system which attaches unequal rewards and privileges to different positions in society.

People differ in terms of their innate ability and talent. Positions differ in terms of their

importance for the survival and maintenance of the society. Certain positions are more 'functionally important' than others. There are some tasks which require training or skills and there are limited number of individuals with ability to acquire such skill.

Positions usually require long period of training which involves certain sacrifices such as loss of income. Therefore high reward is necessary to provide incentive to encourage people to undergo training for a position to compensate them for the sacrifice involved. It is necessary for those who hold most important positions to play their roles must efficiently.

The high rewards attached to these positions provide required motivation for such performances. These rewards – usually economic, prestige and leisure-are attached to or built in to the social position. Thus, Davis and Moore conclude that social stratification is a device by which societies insure that the most important positions are filled by qualified persons and roles performed adequately.

They say, there is the necessity to distribute prestige according to the importance to society of a social position. Prestige, reward involve the exercise of greater power. The possession of greater wealth, prestige and power marks off a section of society as a class.

In response to the question, which positions are functionally most important, they suggest that the importance of a position can be measured in two ways. Firstly by the degree to which position is functionally unique, there being no other position that can perform the same function satisfactorily. It could be argued that a doctor is functionally more important than a nurse.

Because his position carries with it many of the skills necessary to perform role of a doctor.

But not the vice versa. The second measure of importance is the degree to which other positions are dependent on the one in question. It may be argued that managers are more important than routine office staff since the staffs are dependent on direction and organisation from management.

To sum up, Davis and Moore regard social stratification as a functional necessity.

Criticism:

M.M. Tumin, Walter Buckley, Michael Young and others have criticised this theory of stratification. Their arguments run as follows.

They point out that stratification may actually hinder the efficient working of a social system.

Because it may prevent those with superior abilities from performing certain tasks which are preserve of a privileged class.

Second, they cannot agree with the functionalist view that some tasks are more important to a society than others, for one cannot operate than other.

Third, Tumin questions the view that social stratification functions to integrate social system. He argues that differential rewards can encourage hostility, and distrust among various segments of society.

Fourth, the sociologists cast doubt on the implicit assumption that actual differentials of reward do reflect difference in the skills required for particular occupations. For, example, a surgeon earns twenty times more than a coal miner. Does this mean that the skills of the surgeon are twenty times greater or more valuable to society than those of the miner.

Fifth, Tumin has rejected the view of Davis and Moore that the function of unequal rewards is to motivate talented individuals and allocate them to functionally most important positions. He argues that social stratification acts as a barrier to the motivation and recruitment of talents. This is readily apparent in closed systems such as caste and racial stratification. For example, untouchables, even most talented, are prevented from becoming Brahmins. Thus, closed stratification system operate in exactly the opposite way to Davis and Moore's theory.

These criticism are true but they cannot be regarded as complete refutation of the functionalist theory of stratification. Eva Rosenfeld has shown in her study that stratification is inevitable. Her study was on Israeli Kibbutzim system and many of Kibbutzim are found on the Marxist Principle of from everyone according to ability – to everyone according to need.

Despite various arrangements designed to create an egalitarian society, social inequality exists in the Kibbutzim. Eva Rosenfeld has identified two distinct social strata which are recognised by members.

The upper stratum is made of 'leader – manager. The lower stratum consists of the rank and file', the agricultural labourers and machine operators. Authority and prestige are not equally distributed. Rosenfeld notes that lead managers are respected for their contribution to the communal enterprise. Rosenfeld's study lends some support to the functionalist claim that social stratification, at least in terms of power and prestige, is inevitable.

Marxist/Conflict Theory:

A different view of society is taken by the conflict theorists, who see stratification as the result of the differential distribution of power in which coercion, domination, exploitation are viewed

as key processes. The assumptions of the conflict theorists basically are:

1. Every society is at every point subject to processes of change, social change is ubiquitous.
2. Every society displays at every point dissensions and conflict, social conflict is ubiquitous.
3. Every element in a society renders a contribution to its integration and change.
4. Every society is based on the coercion of some of its members by others.

Conflict theorists view stratification in terms of individuals and subgroups within a society.

This theory argues that inequality exists in society because there is always a shortage of available valued goods and services and therefore there is always a struggle over who shall get what. Inequality results because desirable social positions are attained not by talent or ability, but by force, by birth, by dominance, by exploitation or by coercion.

Karl Marx never gave theory of stratification; he gave a theory of social class on the basis of which we derive stratification or inequality in society. In the view of Marx, the concept of class is fundamental.

Classes according to Marx, are large groups of people who differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of production, by their relation to the means of production, and by their role in the social organisation of labour, and consequently the methods by which they receive their share of social wealth and the amount of this wealth they possess.

Class, according to Marx, is a historical category. It is connected with a certain stage in the development of production, with certain stage in development of production with certain type of production relation. Classes arise for reasons of historical necessity connected with appearance of exploitative modes of production.

The first exploitative mode of production was slavery, in which the principal classes were slaves and slave-owners. Slavery was followed by feudalism under which the landowners and the serfs constituted two principal classes. Feudalism was replaced by capitalism under which capitalists and the proletariat are two main contending classes.

Besides these classes of an exploitative society, Marx recognised that social differentiation produced many other groups with conflicting interests. He also recognised the existence of the middle classes (petty bourgeoisie).

These classes own the means of production but also contribute their labour power, like the proletariat. Every class-society becomes a theatre of conflict-conflict between classes of

opposing interests. Men in different relations to the means of production naturally have opposed interests.

In capitalist society, the owners of capital have a vested interest in maximizing profit and seek to keep the profit for themselves which has been created by the workers. Thus, class conflict, according to Marx, takes place between capitalist and the proletariat under capitalism. The development of society is determined by the outcome of this class conflict. "The history of all hitherto existing society", wrote Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, "is a history of class struggle."

Marx said that class conflict is resolved by revolutionary abolition of the old production relation and old classes and their replacement by new ones. He showed that in capitalist society the class struggle inevitably leads to the abolition of classes and the establishment of classless society, socialism'.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism was produced by struggle between landed aristocracy and a rising capitalist class. The rising capitalist class overthrew the feudal aristocracy and will be similarly displaced by the working class. Marx's basic thought was that the proletariat which sets all the means of production in motion yet never owns them is the 'last class'.

The proletariat comes in to conflict with the bourgeoisie, and in the course of the struggle, becomes of its position as a "class-for-itself" in economic and political competition with the capitalist class. The outcome of their struggle, other things being equal, is the overthrow of the capitalist class and the capitalist relation of production.

The proletariat cannot emancipate itself as a class without abolishing the capitalist system of production, where it is the exploited and oppressed class. To liberate itself, therefore, the proletariat must abolish itself as a class, thus abolishing all classes and class rule as such.

The transition to socialism does not take place automatically. It is the historic role of the working class to bring about this transition which is opposed by the capitalist class. The question of the form in which the revolutionary process was to occur by peaceful or violence means. The transfer of state power from the capitalist class is the basic question of the socialist revolution. It can only be effected through a sharp class struggle, the highest form of which is revolution.

Criticism:

Sorokin has criticised Marx's theory on three grounds. First he says, it is old. Marx himself referred to Augustinian Theory as the "father of class struggle in French historical writings". In his Letter to Weydemeyer he stated that the new that he did was to prove that "the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical process in the development of production" and the class struggle in capitalist society would lead to the establishment of a classless society. This is the originality of Marx. Secondly Sorokin says, the acceptance of class struggle as the motive force of the development of society leads to the denial 'of cooperation of social classes which has been the basis of the progress of mankind. Thirdly, Marx's class theory is wrong because it does not recognise the importance of other antagonisms such as the struggle of racial, national and religious groups.

Raymond Aron and Lipset have tried to argue against Marx's theory of class. They argued that with the advancement of economy, there is minimum opposition or hostility among classes. The ruling class engages in welfare activities like making charitable schools, hospitals etc. But antagonism would not disappear, class antagonism would disappear in a Marxist Utopia, but surely other types of antagonism would arise.

T.B. Bottomore is another thoughtful critic of Marxism. According to Bottomore, Marx assigned too much significance to social class and class conflict. He has ignored other important social relationships. Bottomore claims that the gap between the two major classes has not widened because there has been a general rise in everyone's standard of living. The working class has developed new attitudes and aspirations which are not receptive to revolution. Revolution has not occurred and will not occur because of expanded social services, greater employment, security and increased employment benefits. Bottomore criticized Marx's argument that the middle class would disappear because its members would join one or the other two great classes. Instead there has been tremendous growth in the middle class.

Dahrendorf argued that Marxist analysis is not applicable to post capitalist society. Internal contradictions which Marx thinks will arise, do not arise easily. Dahrendorf says as Marx himself talked of Division of Labour, we can see that economic factors are not the important factors.

Weber treats Marx's concept of class as an ideal type, a logical construct based on observed tendencies. He gives more importance to Status, Prestige and Power. He says that class is not something to be perceived in terms of means of production.

Multidimensional Theory:

Multidimensional theory is associated with the name of Max Weber felt that the influence or the effect that the behaviour of another individual or group, manifests itself in several ways. Influence, a by-product of social interaction and culture, is reciprocal it exists in many forms and is unevenly distributed throughout the social order. He felt that there were at least three independent orders or hierarchies in any society. Weber actually used the terms class, status and party respectively to refer to three orders – economic, social and political.

Max Weber has profoundly influenced modern sociological writing about social stratification. His framework to explain and analyse the system of social stratification is based on three dimensions of 'class', status and power. According to him all or nearly by all the members of the society are collectively ranked above or below one another in terms of class status and power.

Max Weber agreed with the fundamental tenants of Marx that control over property was a basic fact in the determination of the life-chances of an individual or a class-Weber says, "classes are stratified according to their relation to the production and acquisition of goods".

That is to say, class is determined by a person's market situation, which depends largely on whether or not he owns property. Market situation determines income, and the life chances which depends on this. Hence, Weber's definition of class is broadly similar to that of Marx.

Weber's analysis of classes, status groups and parties suggests that no single theory can pinpoint and explain their relationships. The interplay of class, status and party in the formation of social group is complex and must be examined in particular societies during particular time periods. Marx attempted to reduce all forms of inequality to social class and argued that classes formed the only significant social group in society. Weber argues that the evidence provides a more complex and diversified picture of social stratification.

Class stratification is a form of social stratification in which a society is separated into parties whose members have different access to resources and power. An economic, natural, cultural, religious, interests and ideal rift usually exists between different classes. People are usually born into their class, though social mobility allows for some individuals to attain a higher-level class or fall to a lower-level one.

Process of class stratification

In the early stages of class stratification, the majority of members in a given society have

similar access to wealth and power, with only a few members displaying noticeably more or less wealth than the rest.

As time goes on, the largest share of wealth and status can begin to concentrate around a small number of the population. When wealth continues to concentrate, pockets of society with significantly less wealth may develop, until a sharp imbalance between rich and poor is created. As members of a society spread out from one another economically, classes are created.

When a physical gap is added, a cultural rift between the classes comes into existence, an example being the perception of the well-mannered, "cultured" behavior of the rich, versus the "uncivilized" behaviour of the poor. With the cultural divide, chances for classes to intermingle become less and less likely, and mythos becomes more and more common between them (i.e. "the wrong side of the railroad tracks"). The lower class loses more of its influence and wealth as the upper class gains more influence and wealth, further dividing the classes from one another.

Social class is usually regarded as being conceived of as sets of positions rather than as individuals who happen to fill them at any particular time. Class structure is the "empty spaces" that persons occupy without altering the shape of the class structure.

Erik Olin Wright produced class schemata, in attempts to retain a Marxist approach to class analysis. In Wright's first schema he states that in capitalism simple production exists alongside the capitalist mode of production. In this schema the bourgeoisie, the self-employed working who engage in simple production are one class. In the model there are two distinctive classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production, and the proletariat are the exploited workers. Both of these classes can be broken down into six classes that make up Wright's first schema. The supervisors and managers are in a contradictory class because they dominate over the proletariat and yet they are still dominated by the bourgeoisie. The small employers are both petty bourgeois and bourgeois; and the semi-autonomous employees while they do not own the means of production, they benefit from having more autonomy over their work than the normal proletariat. These classes are based upon exploitation and domination. Exploitation exists between those who own the means of production and those who do not. Domination is measured according to the amount of autonomy that can be exercised by the workers and to which extent they are supervised. Wright's second schema involve a 12-class schema and is based upon exploitation. In the

second schemata exploitation has three dimensions: ownership of the means of production, ownership of organization assets that permit control and coordination of technical processes of production, and ownership of skills or credentials.

John Goldthorpe's class schema is to differentiate positions within labour markets and production units, or more specifically to differentiate such positions in terms of the employment relations that they entail. Goldthorpe schema distinguishes the employers, the self-employed, and employees. Within the group of employees eleven classes are defined on the basis of the employment relationship they enjoy. The aim of the schema is to group occupational title/employment relations, and the employment relationships joined by given combinations may differ cross-nationally.

As the theories relate to class stratification the common characteristic shared by the actors involve the position they occupy in relations defined by labour markets and productive processes. Class has often been defined as the significant determinant of life chances. The deliberate acts of individual actors are undertaken from a position of social power which is determined by class membership. The resources an individual possesses and the constraints they face and the course of action they take leads to having a higher probability of being

undertaken than others. These processes lead to class position becoming a powerful predictor of many kinds of behaviour

Max Weber (Runciman, 1969) agrees that class refers to a group of persons who share a common situation in regard to their chances in the market place. But, he disagrees with Marx to restrict the economic chances only in terms of ownership and control of the means of production and property, Weber holds that the chances also include the services one could offer. Scarce skills, Weber contends, also could be counted in the market place. Administrative or technical capacities could indeed gain high returns in market place. The case of the social structure of Kibutz (Israeli collectives) elucidates the value of rare skills in a class society (Rosenfeld, 1961). However differential social status exists in the Kibutz society. All property and the means of production belong to the commune and members who leave have no claim on any part of it. Managerial positions are attached with high prestige in Kibutz society.

Members whom the group deem most capable and trustworthy are entrusted with managerial positions. Associating high status ranks with managerial positions has undergone a complex

history. Historically managerial positions gained high prestige of the parsons who became elected to fill them. Weber proposes that class is only one dimension of a complex stratification structure and argues that status and political order, along with class, need to be given full consideration. He stresses the distinctions between the three dimensions viz., economic situation (class), social honour accorded by the community (status) and power exercised in the political or legal realm though often closely interrelated and not always remain necessarily so. The three dimensions of stratification remain distinct. But the differences in ranking of these dimensions are observed in the real world and different patterns of influence are possible in each. Instead of attempting to reduce the complexities of stratification by tracing them to a simple economic cause one could adopt a useful framework for analysing them. Societies granted traditional authority are particularly well qualified to use it, societies governed by traditional authority sometimes find that individuals bestowed it are not always up to the job.