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# UNIT 5 MARX AND WEBER

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## Structure

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we shall discuss the views of two the founding fathers of sociology, namely, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Both these thinkers have made tremendous contributions for sociological thought. We will of course concentrate on only one aspect of their contribution – social stratification. Both have clear views on this subject and their views are not similar. After reading this unit you will understand:

- how classes emerge in society;
- the basis of class formation;
- role of classes in social stratification; and
- similarities and differences between Marx and Weber on Classes.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Karl Marx (1818-1881) is regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of all times. His views have influenced people classes and nations. His main contribution to understanding society and social processes was through his theory of historical materialism. This presented a radical alternative to the traditional views. Marx tried to understand social development in terms of class conflict. Social stratification was central in his analysis. On the one hand he saw it as a divisive rather than an integrative structure and on the other hand he saw it as inevitable for social development.

Marx Weber (1864-1920) was another outstanding thinker. Like Marx he recognized the economic aspects of stratification but he differed with Marx on several of his basic propositions. While Marx focussed his attention on the toiling classes and looked at social development from their point of view, Weber stressed on the role of the propertied classes in social development. Thus Weber is often referred as the Bourgeois Marx. In this unit we shall discuss separately the views of Marx and Weber on stratification and then compare them. We will then discuss the significance in analysing class in understanding stratification systems.

## 5.2 MARX ON STRATIFICATION

Marx used Historical Materialism as the theory to understand social change. For him the first premise of history was the existence of living human beings. The physical organization of human society and the relations human beings have with nature are important indications of development. All living things depend on nature for survival. Plants need soil and water, cows need grass and tigers need to hunt other animals for survival. Human beings also depend on nature for survival. However the basic difference between human beings and other living things is that they can transform nature for their survival while other living things adapt to nature. A cow eats grass but it cannot grow grass. Human beings exploit nature but they have the power to transform it as well. This means that human beings are able to produce their own means of subsistence. This is the basic difference between human and other living things. Marx therefore noted in his work, *German Ideology*, that “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or by anything one likes. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is determined by their physical condition. In producing their actual means of subsistence men indirectly produce their actual material life”.

It was through production that human beings developed. Primitive human beings were totally dependent on nature as they subsisted through hunting or food gathering. These societies produced the minimum needs for survival. As human beings gradually started transforming nature society was able to produce more for existence of the people.

### 5.2.1 Division of Labour

Through the development of technology, human beings were able to improve agriculture and could form settled communities. As production grew, the community produced more than its requirements. There was surplus. It was now possible to support people who were not directly involved in the production of food. In earlier societies all people performed similar activities which were needed for survival, namely, food, clothing and shelter. Once there was surplus it was possible for people to diversify their activities. Hence some produced food, which was sufficient to feed all, while others were engaged in other activities. This is called the division of labour.

This system resulted in some people gaining control over the mean of production by excluding others. Thus property, which was held by all, came under the control of only some members giving rise to the notion of private property. Hence now the interests of all people were no longer common. There were differences in interests. Thus the interests of individuals became different from the interests of the community. Marx stated that “Division of Labour and private property are identical expressions”. It implied the contradictions between individual and communal interest.

These differences which occur in human society which are due to the existence of private property lead to the formation of classes which form the basis of social stratification. In all stratified societies, there are two major groups: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class exploits the subject class. As a result there is basic conflict of interest between the two classes. Marx further stated in his work, *Contributions of the Critique of Political Economy*, that the various institutions of society such as the legal and political systems, religion etc. are instruments of ruling class domination and serve to further its interests. Let us now examine the term ‘class’.

### 5.2.2 Meaning of Class

Marx used the term ‘class’ to refer to the two main strata in all stratification systems. As mentioned earlier, there are two major social groups in all stratified societies: a ruling

class and a subject class. The ruling class derives its power through its control over the means of production. It is thus able to appropriate the labour of another class. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes class in this way: "Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class."

**Activity 1**  
**Discuss with people you know what is meant by class. Note down the various interpretations you get. Do some of them tally with Marx's conception of class?**

From Marx's perspective, systems of stratification derive from the relationships of social groups to the forces of production. Marx used the term class to refer to the main strata in all stratification systems. His definition of class has specific features. Class comprises two major groups, one of which controls the means of production is able to appropriate the labour of the other class due to the specific position it occupies in the social economy. Hence a class is a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. This in fact distinguishes one class from the other.

Another aspect of classes, which is seen from Marx's description given above, is that they are in opposition to each other. At the same time there is a relationship of dependence between classes. If one class can appropriate the labour of another class because of its control over the means of production, it means that the two classes are dependent on each other but they are also opposed to each other. The dialectics of class therefore is a result of this combination of dependence and opposition. The relationship between classes is a dynamic relationship which results in social change. This is why classes are central to Marx's approach to social transformation. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx wrote, "Hitherto, the history of all societies is the history of class struggle." In other words, changes in the history of mankind are caused by the conflict of classes. Classes conflict is hence the engine for social change.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Write down Marx's ideas on the division of labour. Use about five lines for Your answer.

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2) Describe what is the meaning of class according to Marx. Use about five lines for your answer.

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## 5.2.2 Growth of Class

Development of society is through the process of class conflict. The domination of one class over the other leads to class conflict. Alongside the production process also develops due to changes in technology, resulting in its improvement. This leads to changes in the class structure as classes become obsolete with increase in production techniques. New classes are then formed. Replacing the old classes. This leads to further class conflict. Marx believed that Western societies had developed through four main stages: primitive communism, ancient society, feudal society and capitalist society. Primitive communism is represented by societies of pre-history. Those societies, which are dependent on hunting and food gathering and which, have no division of labour. From then onwards, all societies are divided into two major classes: masters and slaves in ancient society, land lords and serfs (tenants) in feudal society and capitalist and wage labour in capitalist society. During each historical epoch, the labour power required for production was supplied by the subject class, that is by slaves, serfs and wage labourers respectively.

The polarization of classes into opposite groups is a result of class-consciousness. This is a separate but related phenomenon. It is not necessarily the result of class formation. Class-consciousness is linked with the process of polarization of classes. A class can exist without its being aware of its class interests.

### Box 5.01

**When people in a particular group, the membership of which is determined by the production relations into which they are born or enter into voluntarily, become aware of their existence as a distinctive class they are said to be conscious of their class. For instance, workers are constantly organizing wage struggles in their own interests. These interests are the outcome of the economic relations of capitalist society. They exist objectively, in the sense that they have not been invented by any theoretician, political party, trade union or any such external force. But the existence of these objective conditions is not enough. The workers must be aware of these conditions.**

In the extract from *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx has referred to the importance of class formation when he noted that only when a class is aware of its opposition to another class it is conscious of its being. In another place, in his major contribution, *Capital*, he comments that workers left on their own may not be aware of their class interests as being opposed to those of the other (capitalist) class. He noted that the advance of capitalist production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit looks upon the conditions of production as self-evident laws of nature. In the ordinary run of things the labourer can be left to the natural laws of production as self-evident laws of nature. In the ordinary run of things the labourer can be left to the natural laws of production.

This static nature of class relations changes into a dynamic one with the development of class-consciousness. Without class-consciousness the working is merely in relation to capital. It is a class in itself. In his work *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx observes that the working class which exists in this manner is only a mass of individuals and is a mere class in itself. When it unites in its struggle against capital it "forms itself into a class for itself. The interests it defends becomes class interests."

Hence in the Marxist framework we find that class is a dynamic unit. It may be subject to change with the advancement of technology, but the basis for its formulation remains the same. Class forms the basis of the stratification system in any society. Classes are related to the production process of each society. Changes in the class structure occur when there are changes in the production process. Thus the system of stratification in a society is dependent on the relations of production.

Marx Weber as mentioned in the beginning, is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Sociology. He is also the originator of the most powerful alternative to the Marxist theory of society. We shall discuss his views on class and other forms of social stratification in this section.

Like Marx, Weber also believed that class was a basic form of stratification in society. He defined the term 'class' according to the Marxist criterion, namely, in relation to ownership of property. Property and lack of property, according to him, were the basic categories of all class situations. He went on to distinguish between two types of property-ownership and non-ownership of goods and services. Those who owned property offered goods while those not owning had only their labour power or skills to offer. Thus a factory owner can offer goods which were produced in the factory. His workers, on the other hand, can offer only their labour power in exchange of wages.



Labour working at a building site

*Courtesy: A. Yadav*

### 5.3.1 Class and Life - Chances

Another aspect of class that Weber stressed on was 'life-chances'. This term related to the opportunities an individual got during the various stages of his or her life. An individual born in a worker's family receives a particular type of education, which in turn equips him or her for specific jobs. The education will not be as expensive or as intense as the education of a child in an upper class family. The employment opportunities for both are different. Their different family backgrounds also make them part of different classes. The same pattern can be seen in social interaction and marriage. A person from a working class background will interact mostly with other members of his or her class whereas a person from the upper-middle class will have acquaintances mainly from his class. Thus Weber found that life-chances was an important aspect of class formation.

**Box 5.02**

**While discussing life-chances Weber's emphasis was on the group or the community and not on the individual. He insisted that while determining class, we have to look at the life-chances of the collective and not of individuals within the collective. This is a very important aspect of class as a collective. It is possible that the life-chances of an individual may be different. For example the child of a worker may be able to surpass his or her class barrier. He/ she may get a better education and get employment that is different from the opportunities available for his/her peers.**

The son of an industrialist may become a worker because of his abilities or other circumstances. But these, Weber pointed out, were exceptions and not the rule. He pointed out that what was more important was the fact that the life-chances of members of a class were similar. This is what gave permanence to that class as the next generation too joined the same class. Therefore the definition of life-chances, according to Weber, is sharing of economic and cultural goods which are available differently for different groups.

The life-chances of an individual were largely determined by the market situation. The son of a worker became a worker because this was the best occupation available to him given his background. The market situation becomes more important for the propertyless as they have to depend mainly on the production of services as they possess only their skills. They cannot market anything else for their existence. The property owners on the other hand can depend on the income they get from their productive property.

Hence for Weber class had two basic aspects. Firstly it was an objective category. It was determined by the control or lack of control over productive property of the members. Secondly, all members of a particular class had similar life-chances, which in turn distinguished these members from others. The life-chances of individuals depended on their market situation in the case of those not owning productive property and on the ownership of productivity for those owning these.

Based on his definition, Weber identified four classes in capitalist society. These were: (a) Upper class that comprised those owning or controlling productive private property. This class was similar to the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) in Marx's analysis. (b) White-collar workers. This class included all those who were engaged in mental labour - managers, administrators, professionals, etc. (c) Petty bourgeoisie. These were the self-employed and they included shopkeepers, doctors, lawyers, etc. (d) Manual workers. These people sold their physical labour in exchange for wages. The working class was included in this class. Weber thus divided society into four classes as opposed to Marx's two-class model. Hence though Weber found the basis of class formation was similar to that of Marx he differed with Marx on the types of classes in society.

### 5.3.2 Status

Like Marx, Weber also distinguished between class and class-consciousness. As discussed above, for Marx, class-consciousness was an important aspect of class. A class could articulate its interests if it was conscious of its existence as a special group. Weber too talked of class-consciousness but he did not think it as necessary for the existence of a class. Instead he looked for an alternative to class-consciousness and he found it in status. Weber noted that whereas an individual's class situation need not lead to his becoming class conscious, he was always conscious of his status.

**Activity 2**

**Discuss with other students in the study centre what is meant by status. Do their conceptions fit in with Weber's view on status? Note down your findings.**

According to Weber, classes were formed on the basis of economic relations. Status groups, he noted, were normally 'communities'. He defined status as a position in society determined by social estimation of 'honour'. There were links between class and status but

in many cases they were in opposition to each other. Class was associated with production of goods and services or in acquisition of the same. Status was determined by consumption. Thus status was associated with a life style where there were restrictions on social intercourse. Weber noted that the most rigid and well-defined status boundaries could be found in India's caste system. A Brahman may belong to the working class because it was the means of his livelihood, however he would always consider himself superior to a person from a lower caste even though the class situation of both may be the same. At the same time that Brahman worker may have greater interaction with other Brahmans belonging to classes higher than his. In our society we can see that inter-caste marriage is not tolerated even when both families are from the same class but they occupy different statuses in the caste hierarchy.

There in a stratified society, Weber found that property differences generated classes whereas prestige differences generated status grouping. There were the two main bases of social stratification.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Describe Weber's views on Classes and Life chances. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Outline some of the similarities and differences between Weber and Marx so far as their views on social stratification is concerned. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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### 5.4 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARX AND WEBER

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From the above discussions we can see that there are some similarities between the two thinkers on stratification. There are major differences as well. For Marx the basis of stratification was class. The formation of class was objective in the sense that a class was not formed because a group of people got together and decided that they form a class. Its formation was because of the production relations that existed in a society. Therefore a person's position in the class structure was based on his position in the production relations. If he happened to own or control capital and he employed others, he was a capitalist. Those who did not own or control property belonged to the opposing class of worker.

Opposition of classes was an important aspect of Marx's analysis. It was through this opposition that social and economic change took place. The capitalists invent new ways to counteract workers. This could be new technology resulting in better production techniques or new laws preventing workers from becoming more powerful. The workers too in their struggle become more united. They tend to drop their internal differences when they realise that their main opponent is another class. This leads to greater unity among them. Thus for Marx, class and class-consciousness do not mean mere categories in society. They are fundamental for social development.

At one level, Weber accepts Marx's view on class. However he does so not to support Marx but to show how his analysis has weaknesses. He stresses that society cannot be divided into only two main classes. There are more classes that emerge due to the market situation and the type of work done. He therefore finds that there are four main classes in society. This in effect confuses the class relations. Thus Weber feels that neither class nor class-consciousness can explain stratification completely. He thus lays greater stress on status, whereas Marx lays stress on class-consciousness. Weber tries to show that class-consciousness is not an important aspect of social stratification. For him status groups are the basis. He finds that classes are static whereas status stretches across classes.

While comparing the two we must keep in mind that Weber was an opponent on Marx's views. He tried to provide alternatives to Marx. In this sense the two cannot be compared because Weber's work was not complimentary to that of Marx (just as Davis' approach to stratification was complementary to that of Parsons as we shall show in the next unit). It was primarily developed to oppose Marx. Thus despite some similarities, their works are basically different.

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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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In the above unit we have discussed the views two of the founders of sociology, Karl Marx and Max Weber, on social stratification. Both thinkers have views that have shaped and influenced human development.

Karl Marx's views were based his theory of historical materialism. He viewed social stratification from the historical perspective. The changes in stratification in human society were based on the changing nature of production. Classes formed the basis of the system of stratification. As the production relations changed the nature of stratification also changed. New classes were formed replacing the old ones. This also resulted in new relations between classes. Hence for Marx classes and stratification were similar. Marx stressed on the role of class-consciousness as an important instrument for realizing class objectives.

Marx Weber stressed on the formation of classes. The basis of the class was similar to what Marx said but he also stressed that there were four classes instead of two. Weber's differences with Marx did not end there. He tried to show the inadequacy of class analysis as the main means of explaining social stratification. He asserted that status was more important than class. His contention was that people were not as class-conscious as they were status conscious. Hence he felt that status was a better measure of social stratification, even though class was an objective category.

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## 5.6 KEY WORDS

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- Class** : According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same.
- Class** : According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same. According to Weber, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other through their ownership or control of production and who share similar life chances.



**Class-consciousness** : A class that is conscious of its distinguished position in the social hierarchy.

Marx and Weber

**Status** : Effective claim to social esteem. Weber tried to show that status cuts across class barriers.

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## 5.7 FURTHER READINGS

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T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel (eds.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writing in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, Penguin Books, 1963.

H.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Marx Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948.

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## 5.8 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) As technology developed production also improved. Surplus could be produced, and this led to classification of activities, or division of labour. This also led to some people controlling means of production, hence to private property. Thus Marx pointed out that the interests of people became different from those of the community, and class came into existence.
- 2) For Marx Class devoted the two main strata found in stratification systems. There is a ruling class and a subject class. The means of production are controlled by the ruling class and this is how it appropriate the labour of the working class. Finally these classes are opposed or antagonistic to one another.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Weber defined class in relation to private property, but he distinguished between ownership of goods and ownership of skills. The factory owner could offer goods but his workers offer labour power in exchange of wages. Further life chances for Weber meant the opportunities an individual got during various stages of his life. Education and family background affect life chances. The emphasis however has to be on the group and these can improve or deteriorate the position. Finally life chances of a class were similar to which there were some exceptions.
- 2) There are both similarities and differences between Marx and Weber regarding their views on social stratification. Thus opposition of classes based on ownership of means of production was basic to Marx's thought. The class and class consciousness are basic to social development for Weber. Society cannot be divided into only two classes, and he finds four classes in society Weber lays greater stress on status whereas Marx emphasizes class consciousness. Thus despite the similarity that both scholars emphasized the importance of the class, their views were not really similar.

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# UNIT 6 PARSONS AND DAVIS

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## Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Functionalist Theory of Stratification
- 6.3 Talcott Parsons' Approach
  - 6.3.1 Value Consensus and Stratification
- 6.4 Davis-Moore Theory
  - 6.4.1 Functions of Stratification
  - 6.4.2 Basic Propositions
- 6.5 Criticism of the Theory
- 6.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.7 Key Words
- 6.8 Further Readings
- 6.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit deals with the theory of social stratification put forward by two well-known American sociologists, Parsons and Davis. This theory is also known as the Functionalist Theory of Social Stratification. Though this theory has been widely accepted by sociologists for analysing social stratification, there have been some strong criticisms of this theory. We shall examine all these aspects of the theory. Hence, after reading this unit you will understand:

- the Background of this theory;
- what this theory states;
- the problems in explaining this theory;
- the criticism put forth by some well-known sociologists; and
- the importance of the theory in understanding society.

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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The functionalist theory tries to explain the reasons why a society is able to survive. The underlying belief of this theory is that all societies want stability and peace. The people in society do not want chaos and confusion because this will disrupt their day-to-day activities. Hence all societies want order and some form of discipline. These are the means of achieving stability in society.

The functionalists view society as some form of organism consisting of different parts. These parts are integrated to the whole and they work in co-operation with each other. The human body is a complex organism that comprises different parts of the body. Each of these parts is separate but they form an integrated whole. Similarly, in society there are different parts that perform different roles. If we look at the total picture of society we will see that all these parts perform roles which contribute to the stability of the entire society. In other words they contribute to the integration of society. For example, we find that people have different types of occupations and people perform different types of activities. There are doctors, lawyers, teachers, students workers, industrialists, farmers, weavers etc. Though all these activities are different they are all needed for the functioning of the society. Therefore they can be viewed as separate parts which work together in order to

- integrate the society.

Hence we can see that the functionalist approach maintains that every component of the social structure performs specific functions which are necessary for maintaining stability in that society. These functions are necessary for the survival of that society. Hence the system of stratification in a society is also necessary for its integration and its stability.

## 6.2 FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF STRATIFICATION

The functionalists accept the fact that all societies are stratified. In other words, all the functions carried out by the various members of society are functional for its survival but they are not equal in status. Some of the functions are superior to the others. They are ranked higher. The people who perform these functions are also regarded as superior to others, i.e. those below them. The functionalist theories of stratification attempt to explain how social inequalities occur and why they are necessary for society.

The functionalists presume that there are certain basic needs of the every society. These needs have to be met or else there will be instability in society. These needs are known as functional prerequisites. Secondly, though these functional prerequisites are important, they are ranked according to the importance that is granted to them in that society. For example, workers and managers are needed to run a factory. No factory can exist with only workers and no managers or only managers and no workers. Hence managers and workers are integral for running a factory. At the same time it will be wrong to assume that because both groups are necessary, both have equal status. This is not so. The managers enjoy higher status than the workers do. Hence integration does not mean equality. It means that all the different groups together contribute towards stability but they do so because they are stratified in a hierarchy. What is the basis of this hierarchy and, why do people accept it? These are the questions that the theorists try to explain. In the next section we shall examine the views of Talcott Parsons, the most eminent of the functionalists theorists.

## 6.3 TALCOTT PARSONS' APPROACH

The central point of the Parsons's analysis of social systems is the problem of order. He believed that all social systems came into existence because people within this system wanted order and stability. A social system, according to Parsons, existed when two or more people interacted with each other in a bounded situation and their actions influenced others. This means that a social system must first of all have a group of people. This group could comprise two individuals or even a country. Secondly these people exist within a common boundary. Thirdly, they interact with each other, either directly or indirectly. And lastly, their actions influence each other's behaviour.

One can notice this form of action in our every day life. In your daily life you interact with number of people. While doing so your behaviour is influenced by the person you interact with. For example, when you are speaking to your father or to an elder you behave in a particular manner. When you are interacting with your friends and peers you behave in a different manner. Why do you do this? Why is your behaviour not the same with all people you interact with? According to Parsons, this is because in the course of your interaction, your action (behaviour) is influenced by the actions of the other person. This makes you change or adapt your behaviour in different situations.

### Activity 1

**Discuss with other students at the study centre concerning the problem of order in society. Note down your findings in a notebook.**

The regulation of your behaviour in different situations is mainly because you, as an individual, behave in a given manner because every body else behaves in a similar manner in the given situation. Moreover, you also know that if you do not behave in the prescribed manner a situation may be created which will give rise to disorder. For example, if you have behave in a rude manner with your friends as if the person in your enemy, a hostile situation will be created and you may lose the friendship. Hence you will behave with him or her in the manner which is expected.

Therefore we can assume that the action of any person is determined by whom he or she is interacting with. This in turn is determined by the rules of behaviour in a particular society or social system. The rules of behaviour are further based on the common consensus of the people and that is why it is taken as correct. This common consensus is what Parsons calls Values. Social values are therefore the shared beliefs of a society. The way in which these values are practised (the actions which result in these values) are known as Norms. Social norms are thus the rules of behaviour.

Parsons further states that social values and norms arise out of the need for every society to maintain order and stability. Values and norms will differ in each society because the needs of each society are different. But the common factor in the value system of each society is the need for stability. Hence each society devises its own values which are best suited for this purpose.

### 6.3.1 Value Consensus and Stratification

How does the value system of a society emerge? Parsons attempts to answer this question by stressing that values do not arise out of the mind of an individual (king or priest in the earlier times). Values are shared beliefs. This means that all members of a society agree that the given values are the best means through which stability can be maintained in their society. In this way values are not only shared beliefs but they emerge out of consensus of the members of that society. This consensus emerges because all members of a society want order and stability in their daily life. Therefore, order stability and co-operation are based on the values consensus. There is an agreement by members on what is good for all.

#### Box 6.01

Parsons argues that it follows from the existence of values that individuals will be evaluated and therefore placed in some form of rank order. Therefore the different strata in a society is based on a hierarchy which in reality forms its stratification system. Parsons stated that "Stratification is the ranking of units in a social system in accordance with the common values system." Hence it is the value system which creates stratification in a society. Moreover, differences in the strata are justified by the values system.

In any society, those performing according to the social values are better rewarded. The type of rewards, according to Parsons, depends on what the values of that society define as superior. For example traditionally among the Rajputs high value was placed on bravery and valour. Hence any person displaying these qualities was better rewarded and given a higher rank. Among other communities higher value may be placed on business acumen and the ability to trade profitably. Hence those who prove themselves in these fields will be ranked high. Similarly in all societal systems the value system places higher rewards on some qualities and lesser rewards for other qualities. In case a person violates the social values he or she is punished. Hence in a society which places greater values on bravery a person who shows traces of cowardice will lose rank.

Modern industrial societies, according to Parsons, place higher value on individual achievement. Moreover the emphasis of such societies is on producing goods and services. Hence Parsons noted that in these societies (especially the USA) the value system places "primary emphasis on productive activity within the economy." Thus those who excel in these will be better rewarded. In such societies it is possible for a worker to become a successful industrialist if he has the necessary qualities. After he proves his merit, his status will rise in the social system and he will not only be wealthy but also well respected. In companies the executives who are dynamic and successful get higher rewards in terms of salaries and other benefits. This in turn elevates their position in the stratification system.

1) Outline the functionalist theory. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2) Describe what is value consensus. What role does it play in social stratification? Use about five lines for your answer.

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Therefore we can see that in explaining social stratification, Parsons placed emphasis on the differences that existed among people. These differences, he explained, was in consonance with the value system of that society and hence was necessary for the stability of the that society. In fact since the value system justified the inequalities, they were accepted by all, including those who were in the lower ranks. For example, industrial organizations have elaborate stratification systems. There are differences among the workers on the basis of their skills and experiences. Those who are skilled and show leadership qualities are rewarded through promotions, higher wages etc. Similarly though both labour and management are needed to run an industrial organisation, the position of the management is superior to that of workers. These differences may cause conflicts but since they are backed by the value system, there are few instances of intensive conflict over these issues. Even a militant trade union accepts the fact that management is superior. This is because the value system allows for these differences. Hence, Parsons argued, the people by and large accept these differences and major conflict is prevented. All people, whether they be workers or in management, believe that this system is the best. If these values are challenged this would lead to instability in that society.

Therefore we can summarise Parsons main points thus:

- Value consensus is an essential part of all societies.
- Social stratification is inevitable in all societies.
- The stratification system is seen as being just, right and proper for maintaining order and stability. This enables different people to get different rewards.
- Conflicts may occur between those who are rewarded and those who are not rewarded, but this does not threaten the existing system because it is kept in check by the value system.

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## 6.4 DAVIS – MOORE THEORY

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Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore have further developed the functionalist theory of stratification. Both are eminent American sociologists and they were students of Talcott Parsons. They elaborated their view in an article titled, "Some Principles of Stratification". This article became very popular and controversial. Their views have been supported by functionalists and have been severely criticised by others. Their views are also referred as the functionalist theory of inequality. Let us first discuss their proposition and then we can discuss some of the critiques.

Parsons stressed on the need for stratification in society. He showed that it was inevitable in every society. Davis and Moore elaborated on this and try to examine how stratification becomes effective in any society. In this way the attempt to extend Parsons argument. The main problem they pose is why do certain positions carry different degrees of prestige? And, how do individuals get into these positions?

The authors support Parson's view that the basis of the existence of societies in order and stability. All societies have their own functional prerequisites which help them survive and operate effectively. Let us elaborate on this point. Societies are not mere collection of individuals. These individuals have to perform specific tasks so that the requirements of society are fulfilled. There are thus a number of activities that exist in society. A society needs workers, industrialists, managers, policemen, teachers, students artisans and so on. Different individuals who have specialised skills do these different types of work.. Therefore the first functional prerequisite of any society is of allocating these different roles effectively. This will ensure that the right people are placed in proper positions.

There are four aspects of the above-mentioned functional prerequisite. Firstly, all roles in society must be filled. All societies have different types of occupations. These occupations are necessary for their existence. Hence it is necessary to ensure that these occupations are filled. At the same time, mere filled up occupations in not enough. If the wrong people (i.e. people who do not have the requisite skills) are selected for the tasks there will be instability in society. This in especially true if these positions are important. For example if a power generation company employs a well known novelist, who has no idea of power generation, the work of the company will suffer and there will be instability not only in the company but in the supply of electricity. Therefore the second factor is that the most competent people must fill in the positions. Thirdly, in order the best people are selected for the job it is necessary to train them for it. Training therefore is an effective means of ensuring that the best people are selected. In the case of that novelist who is made the head of a power generation company, had he undergone training for fulfilling the needs of that position he could be regarded as the best person. Lastly, the roles must be performed conscientiously. This is very important for ensuring effective performance in the roles. As person may be trained and is the best in the field, but if he does not do his work with dedication the system will suffer. Hence all these four factors are necessary in order to meet the functional prerequisites of a society.



A cobbler mends the footwear of passers by  
*Courtesy: T. Kapur*

### 6.4.1 Functions of Stratification

Davis and Moore state that all societies need some mechanism for ensuring that the best people are selected for the positions and they perform well. According to them the most effective means for ensuring this is social stratification. This system is effective because it offers unequal rewards and privileges to the different positions in society. If all people are given the same rewards then there will be no motivation for people to work harder. There may also be a tendency for people to avoid taking up positions of responsibility or challenging jobs. They know that no matter how well they perform and no matter what position they occupy they will get the same rewards. Therefore stratification is necessary for the efficient functioning of the system.

**Activity 2**

**What is the need for stratification in a society? Discuss with students in the study centre and note down your findings in your notebook.**

The main contributions of a system of unequal rewards are two-fold. Firstly it motivates people to fill certain positions. When positions carry higher rewards people put in greater efforts become qualified for positions. For example if the position of a lecturer carries higher rewards than other professions bright students will strive to fulfil the qualifications for becoming lecturers. In this way society will get better teachers. Secondly, the rewards must be unequal even after fulfilling the position so that the persons who are appointed are motivated to improve their performance further. If lecturers are rewarded for their teaching and research activities through promotions and increased salaries, they will perform their duties better as they would like the higher rewards. In this manner the system of stratification, based on unequal rewards, is beneficial for societies.

Davis and Moore explain that this system of stratification holds true for both modern societies based on competition and for traditional societies that are based on ascription. In modern societies people occupy positions according to their skills and qualifications. Those who are better qualified get better rewards and they occupy positions of prestige. In traditional societies positions are ascribed through birth. In traditional caste oriented Indian society people occupied their positions not due to their competence but through the status they had by birth. The son of a labourer would become a labourer even if he had the intelligence to do other type of superior work. Similarly the son of a landlord would become a landlord even if he were totally incompetent for the job. In such a system the provision of unequal rewards would have no effect in improving the efficiency of the system. However Davis and Moore argue that in such societies the stress is on performance of duties attached to the positions. Thus even though the son of a labourer will remain a labourer, if he performs his duties well he will be rewarded through other means.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) List down the functional prerequisites of Davis and Moore.

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- 2) Say True and False for the statements that are given below:
  - i) All positions in society are of the same functional important.
  - ii) Limited people can perform functionally important roles.
  - iii) No training is required to perform functionally important roles.

### 6.4.2 Basic Propositions of Davis and Moore

In the above sections we have tried to explain the role of social stratification as a functional necessity of societies. In modern societies the basis of status is through achievement and not ascription. In other words the status of a person is determined by his or her merits and not by birth. Such societies are more dynamic and can fulfil their functional prerequisites. In order to achieve this Davis and Moore note that there are some propositions that are common for all these societies. These are:

- 1) In every society certain positions are functionally more important than the others. These positions carry greater rewards and higher prestige. For example, a position in the Indian administrative service is considered to have more prestige than other jobs.
- 2) Only limited people have the necessary merit or talents to perform these roles. We can see that in the case of the IAS examinations several thousands appear for the examinations but only a handful are successful.
- 3) In most cases these positions require a lengthy and intensive training period. This involves sacrifices on the part of the people who acquire these posts. In our own society we can see that certain professions such as medicine, engineering, chartered accountancy etc. involve intensive and expensive training involving a number of years. According to Davis and Moore, this involves sacrifice on the part of the candidate. Hence they must be rewarded for their sacrifice through higher financial rewards and greater prestige in society.

The above propositions are based on the fact that in modern societies achievement values have replaced ascriptive criteria. In these societies a person's merit is more important than his or her birth. The occupations are arranged hierarchically and those at the top have greater rewards and prestige than those below. This system of higher rewards, along with the fact that all can compete for these rewards and only those who are competent will get them, provides motivation to people to strive to perform better. However the most important condition for such a system to survive is that there is social consensus on the importance of the different occupations. This means that the ranking of occupations in terms of their superiority is based on the value consensus of that society.

#### Box 6.02

**Davis and Moore noted that there could be a problem in deciding which positions are functionally more important than others. It is possible that a position that is highly rewarded may not necessarily be functionally important. This in fact is one of the weaknesses of the theory that has been pointed out by its critics (we shall deal with this in more detail in the next section). Davis and Moore suggest that there are ways of measuring whether a superior position is functionally important or not.**

It may be argued that an engineer in a factory is no different than a skilled worker, hence the higher reward for the engineer is not justified. Davis and Moore would argue that the engineer is functionally more important because he has the skills of a skilled worker in addition to his other skills which the skilled worker does not possess. Hence though an engineer can be a skilled worker, a skilled worker cannot become an engineer. The second measure is the "degree to which other positions are dependent on the one in question". Thus an engineer in a factory is more important than the workers are because they are dependent on him for direction in their work.



In brief, Davis and Moore have carried forward Parsons views on stratification by clarifying the reasons for social inequality. They have tried to show that the system of stratification based on unequal rewards and prestige are necessary for maintaining order in society and ensuring its progress.

## 6.5 CRITICISM OF DAVIS AND MOORE'S THEORY

On the face of it the Davis-Moore theory appear rational and realistic. After all in all societies which believe in social and occupational mobility. This is in contrast to a society where there is no mobility as people are assigned roles accordance with their birth. In India too the Constitution grants equal rights to all citizens. It bans discrimination on the basis of caste, race, religion and gender. This is similar to most modern societies where a person's ability is more important than his birth. Under these circumstances the Davis-Moore theory appears realistic as it offers an explanation for the existing inequalities in society. There have been several criticisms of this theory. In fact after it was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1945, it aroused a great deal of interest. Several well-known sociologists of that time reacted by writing articles either in support or in criticism of the theory. As a result this journal had a special issue containing these articles. It is widely recognized that of the critical articles Melvin Tumin's was the most comprehensive. We shall discuss the points he raised he raised in the following paragraphs.

Tumin began his criticism with the statement that functionally important positions are highly rewarded. While it was a fact that rewards were unequal as some received more reward and prestige than other's it could not be categorically stated that these positions are functionally more important. It is possible that some workers in a factory are more necessary for maintaining production than their managers are, though the managers are better rewarded. In such cases if the workers are removed production will be hampered but if some managers are removed it may be still possible to maintain production. Therefore, how could functional importance of a position be measured? A society needs doctors, lawyers, workers and farmers. Each of these positions are functionally important for the existence of a society. Davis and Moore have not provided the means of measuring the functional importance of these positions. In fact some sociologists argue that the importance of position is a matter of opinion and not an objective criteria.

Tumin argues that unequal rewards to people may not necessarily stem from the functional importance of positions. The role of power in determining the importance of positions and thereby appropriating higher rewards is also in also important means of determining the rewards. For example in India workers in the organised sector are better paid and get more social security than the workers in the unorganised sector. This is mainly because the former are unionised and have greater bargaining power than the latter who are not unionised and hence have little protection. The type of work done by workers in both sectors is similar but the rewards as well as the prestige are higher in the organised sector. Hence power play a more important role in determining higher rewards than functional importance.

Tumin challenges the justification of higher rewards on the basis that these positions involve greater training. He argues that training does not necessarily mean sacrifice as the individuals also learn new skills, gain knowledge and thereby benefit. Moreover the rewards for such cases are disproportionate to the sacrifices made during training.

The proportion that unequal rewards help to motivate people in improving their work is also not true according to Tumin. In reality there are barriers to motivation. The system of stratification does not allow the talented people to have equal access to better opportunities. Social discrimination is present in every society and this acts as a barrier. In India where social inequalities are higher it is difficult for the child of a poor person to get better education in order to improve his position. This is true in America as well where Afro-Americans and coloured people are economically worse off and hence they cannot compete for better positions.

There is every possibility that in a system of unequal rewards, those who receive higher rewards will ensure that their children get the same rewards. They will also create barriers

to prevent other from getting into the same positions that their children are in. Doctors may be interested in getting their children into the profession. They will not only try to ensure that their children get in but will also try and prevent other children from getting into profession. T.B. Bottomore in his study *Elites and Societies* shows that even in developed countries such as Britain and France where the stratification system is more open an overwhelming majority of the civil servants were children of civil servants.

The fact is that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy do not have access to the improving their knowledge and skills which will make them competent enough to get the better position. Tumin notes that motivation through unequal rewards can be possible in a system "where there is genuinely equal access to recruitment and training for all potentially talented that differential rewards can conceivably be justified as functionally important. This is rarely possible in most societies." Hence he asserts that "stratification systems are apparently antagonistic to the development of such full equality of opportunity." Tumin therefore argues that those already receiving differential positions can manipulate functionally important positions. Hence Tumin tries to prove that the functional theory of social stratification is not realistic.

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## 6.6 LET US SUM UP

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Social stratification exists in all societies. Every society has its hierarchy in which the different individuals are placed. The main problems for the structural functionalists, such as Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, was how individuals occupy these different positions, and who do we need these difference. They concluded that stratification was not only inevitable in all societies but it was also very necessary for them as it promoted stability and order.

Talcott Parsons tried to explain that all members of society accepted these inequalities because they believed that this was the only way order and stability could be maintained. Therefore the pattern of social stratification and social inequality become a part of the values of that society. He stressed on the role of the value consensus in determining the nature of stratification in a social system.

Davis and Moore extended Parsons argument and tried to examine why certain positions carry different degrees of prestige. They found that positions which are functionally more important for society carry higher rewards and greater prestige. They explained the reasons for this.

This criticism put forth by Melvin Tumin of Davis and Moore's propositions show that functional importance is not the only criteria for deciding on which positions carry higher rewards. There are other factors such as power and status based on birth. Even the so called open societies are influenced by these criteria. He challenges all the major propositions in the theory and he feels that stratification can become antagonising to members of society.

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## 6.7 KEY WORDS

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- Value consensus** : Agreement by all members of a social system on what is accepted for all.
- Functional Prerequisites** : Those values that are necessary for promoting order and stability and thus necessary for the survival of that society.

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## 6.8 FURTHER READINGS

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R. Bendix and S.M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status and Power*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967.

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## 6.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress

- 1) Functionalist theory explains how a society is able to survive. The functionalists view society as an organism with various parts. Each of the part is separate but they form an integrated whole, and contribute to its stability. Thus the system of stratification in a society is also necessary for its integration and stability.
- 2) Values are shared beliefs. Thus values consensus emerges because all members of a society want order and stability in their daily life. Thus order, stability and co-operation are based on the value consensus. This value system is what creates ranking and creates stratification. Thus it is the value system which creates stratification in a society.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) This basic requirement for any society is to allocate various different roles effectively. There are four aspects to these:
  - i) all roles in society must be filled.
  - ii) the most competent people must fill these positions.
  - iii) Training for the job is necessary.
  - iv) Roles must be performed consciously.
- 2)
  - i) False
  - ii) True
  - iii) False

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# UNIT 7 COSER AND DAHRENDORF ON SOCIAL CLASSES

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## Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 L. Coser and R. Dahrendorf
  - 7.2.1 L. Coser
  - 7.2.2 Function of Conflict
  - 7.2.3 Conflicts and Rejections
- 7.3 Class Conflict
- 7.4 Ralph Dahrendorf
  - 7.4.1 Capitalism and Industrial Society
  - 7.4.2 Decomposition of Capital Stock
  - 7.4.3 Decomposition of Labour
  - 7.4.4 Social Mobility and Egalitarian Principles
- 7.5 Towards a Theory of Class Conflict
  - 7.5.1 Basic Assumptions of Integration and Conflict Theories
  - 7.5.2 Dahrendorf's Theory
  - 7.5.3 Dahrendorf on Social Class
  - 7.5.4 Consequences for Social Structure
- 7.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.7 Key Words
- 7.8 Further Readings
- 7.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you should be able to indicate :

- the functions of conflict;
- dahrendorf's theory of capitalism;
- the difference between Marx's conception of capitalism and that of Dahrendorf; and
- compare Coser's theory with that of Dahrendorf's theory.

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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Two opposing theoretical formulations namely Functionalism and Conflict theory have dominated sociological theorising. These have been projected as mutually exclusive, both in terms of domain assumptions as also in terms of their background/ideological assumptions. Functionalism has been seen as a conservative, status-quoist theory, whereas Conflict theory is a radical, progressive one. The debate over which of the two orientations is the appropriate one has led to a convergence between them. The works of Coser and Dahrendorf indicate it. It is particularly so when they examine the phenomenon of social stratification. Both draw heavily upon Marx, but tend to diverge from him. It must be mentioned that Coser's focus was on the study of positive consequences of group conflict and class conflict being a mere variant. On the other hand class and class conflict are the primary focus of Dahrendorf.

We now turn to specifically examine each of these thinkers.

### **7.2.1 Coser**

As functionalism generally and functional theories of stratification, particularly becoming increasingly popular, a small number of scholars began to point out its shortcomings. One of the most telling criticisms was directed against the assumption that social systems are organised on the basis of a broadbased consensus around a system of values. Harmonious functioning of diverse substructures constituted the model.

At the empirical level however, it was quite evident that conflicts of various kind and intensity between and within groups were continually taking place. How does one account for this anomaly? Are conflicts merely an aberration, a passing case of deviance which can be taken care of by the built-in mechanism of social control in the social system? Or are conflicts as much a characteristic feature of the system as consensus? If the latter is the case, then what is the relation between the two? It is this question that Coser was concerned with.

Inspired by Georg Simmel's pioneering work in the area of inter group relations, Coser sees conflict playing a positive, functional role. Coser begins his argument first put forth by Simmel that conflict performs two functions: First, it establishes the identity of groups within the system. It strengthens group consciousness one makes them aware that they are separate from the 'others' they are opposing. It is quite close to what Parsons calls boundary maintenance. Secondly, 'reciprocal repulsions' a phrase used by Simmel, create a balance between groups and thereby contribute to the functioning stability of the social system as a whole.

Although the twin functions of conflict are applicable to all cases of group conflict, these are particularly apt for understanding conflict between stratified groups-castes and classes.

### **7.2.2 Function of Conflict**

The function of conflict in establishing and maintaining group identities is quite clear in Marx's theory of class. For him classes constitute themselves only through conflict with another class. Individuals may store common objective positions with others and yet may not be aware of the communality of interests. It is a class-in-itself. They become a class i.e. class for itself, only when they carry out a common battle against another class.

Let us now turn to the caste system and the role of conflict within it. Let us recall the second function mentioned above, namely 'reciprocal repulsions'. Coser believes that conflict between castes not only establishes distinctiveness and separateness of the various castes but also ensures the stability of the total Indian social structure.

This is possible as a result of a balance of claims made by rival competing castes. Members of the same caste are drawn together in a solidarity resulting from their common hostility and rejection of members of other castes. Hierarchy of positions in the system is maintained because of the rejection by the subgroups or castes in the society of each other.

### **7.2.3 Conflicts and Rejections**

The discussion so far has focussed on the conflicts and rejections of strata and castes of one another and the functional consequences following from them. To recapitulate, two such functions have been mentioned. First conflict with other groups leads to integration and solidarity within the group. Secondly, the system as a whole is maintained by a balance of aversions the groups have for one another.

**Activity 1**

**Discuss with other students the question of conflict. Can conflict have a function?  
Write your thoughts in your notebook.**

An important qualifications is required at this stage for the foregoing discussion. Sometimes, out-groups instead of becoming targets of hostility and rejection, actually become positive reference groups to the group in question (cf. Merton). The out-group may be emulated for purposes of becoming its member in future. Merton calls this anticipatory socialisation. Coser, however, believes that such may not be the case for the caste system where caste positions are fixed for life and there is little possibility of moving from one caste to another. M.N. Srinivas believes, however, that a ritually lower caste may try to adopt the rituals and life styles of higher castes in order to improve the position of the caste in the hierarchy of castes. This he calls the process of 'sanskritisation'.

The open class system, has bounded strata; some movement, both upward and downward is possible. Such mobility, in fact, is an ideal, although in practice there may not be substantial movement. In such a situation, hostility between classes is mixed with positive attraction to the higher classes. The sentiments of hostility towards higher classes do not necessarily mean rejection of the values of these groups but represent a 'sour grapes' attitude: 'that which is condemned is secretly coveted'.

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### 7.3 CLASS CONFLICT

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So far we have talked mainly about the feelings or sentiments of hostility towards other strata. Such negative feelings emerge due to the unequal distribution of privileges. At this stage it is desirable to distinguish between hostile sentiments, feelings or attitudes on one hand and conflict on the other. Conflict is an interaction between two or more persons or groups. Negative feelings or hostility do not necessarily lead to conflict interaction.

If this be so, then we may ask the question as to the conditions under which hostile feelings lead to their acting out in conflict. Coser believes that hostility between groups erupts in case unequal distribution of rights is not considered legitimate. The underprivileged group must first become aware that the rights and privileges to which it is entitled are being denied to it.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What function does Coser see in hostility and conflict, write down your answer in about five lines.

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- 2) According to Coser conflict with other groups leads to
- i) integration and solidarity
  - ii) open hostilities
  - iii) disintegration
  - iv) revolution

In any system of inequality, an ideology upholding it is an invariable concomitant. The negatively privileged group must reject totally any such justificatory ideology. Only if such conscious rejection of legitimate order takes place can feelings be translated into action.

It should immediately occur to you that Coser's analysis of conflict interaction closely resembles that of Marx, especially the transformation of 'class-in-itself' to a 'class-for-itself'. Coser states that when social structures are no longer felt to be legitimate, individuals with similar objective positions will come, through conflict, and form self-conscious groups which have similar interests. (You will see later that a similar position is taken by Dahrendorf also).

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## 7.4 R. DAHRENDORF

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One of the major contributions to a study of classes and class conflicts has come from Ralf Dahrendorf, a German sociologist, in his seminal work 'Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society'. This work is based on a reasoned critique of Marx's writings on class. What Dahrendorf has done is to initially show which of Marx's formulations are tenable and which untenable and then go on to provide a theory of class, class conflict and structured change.

In this section we shall briefly look at his contribution.

### 7.4.1 Capitalism and Industrial Society

One of the first issues which Dahrendorf has taken up for analysis is the nature of capitalism and the classes within it. He has shown that capitalism merely signifies one form of industrial society. The two main elements of capitalism for Marx are private property in means of production and regulation of productive process by private contract (or management or initiative). In other words essentially a combination of private ownership and factual control of the instrument of production.

Marx's analysis of classes and class conflicts is based on the above mentioned characteristics of capitalism. If it can be shown that there are no more operative, than his theory is of little value today.

### 7.4.2 Decomposition of Capital Stock

The emergence and spread on a wide scale of joint stock companies raise serious questions about ownership and control of industrial enterprises with which Marx was concerned. The roles of owner and manager, originally combined in the position of capitalist, have been separated—stockholder i.e. owner, and executive. The owner does not have a defined role in the authority structure of the organisation and those who have it do not necessarily own capital.

The legitimacy of managerial authority stems not from ownership but from the bureaucratic organisation itself. The effect of this development on class conflict includes a change in the composition of groups participating in conflict, a change in the issues that cause conflict and also in the patterns of conflict.

### 7.4.3 Decomposition of Labour

Just as there has been a decomposition of capital, there has also been a decomposition of labour. Marx had believed that with the growth of capitalism the workers will become more and more unsullied, impoverished and homogeneous and will thus act in unison against a unified capitalist class. On the contrary, the workers have become more differentiated. Not only is there a sharp distinction between unskilled and semiskilled workers there is a growing proportion of highly skilled workers. Consequently the earnings and functions differ widely among them.

Let us also not forget the emergence of the new middle class—the white collar salaried employee. Although the salaried employee occupied a middle position in terms of income and prestige, from the point of a theory of conflict there can be no middle class. Where does it belong then in a relation of conflict? This is an important question because the name middle class is quite varied in its composition—from doctors and engineers on one hand and a clerk, office boy on the other. In a conflict situation which among them will be 'haves' and which 'have nots'? Dahrendorf believes that those in the bureaucratic hierarchy belong to ruling class and the white collar worker and others to the working class.

### 7.4.4 Social Mobility and Egalitarian Principles

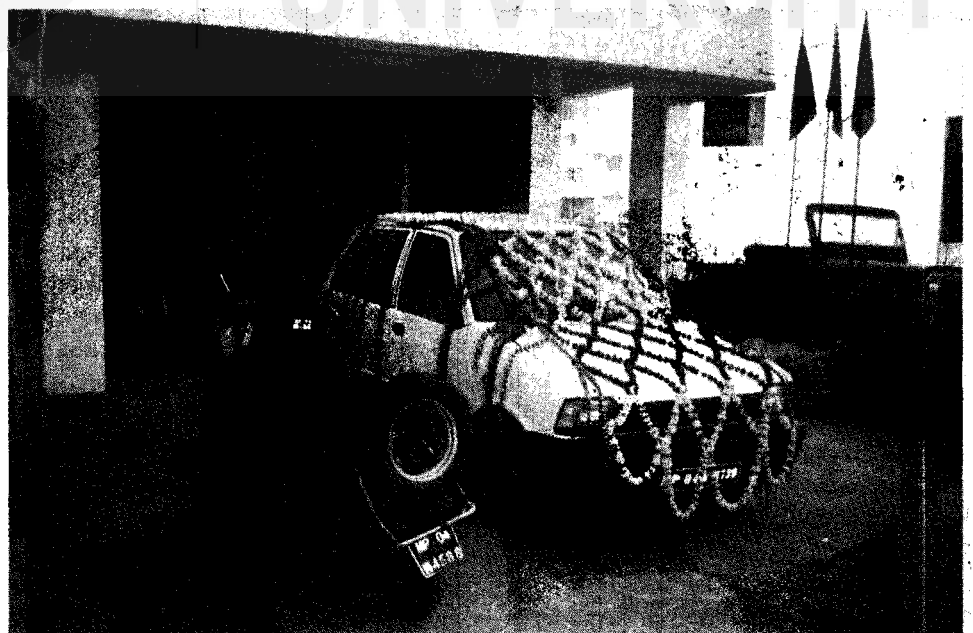
Apart from the decomposition of capital and labour and the emergence of a decomposed new middle class, social mobility has also militated against the homogenisation of classes. Marx had believed that the status an individual occupies in society is determined by his family origin and the position of his parents. In post capitalist societies this is not the case. There has been considerable social mobility both intergenerational as well as intra-generational. What this means for class composition is that the classes will be unstable. Hence the intensity of class conflict diminishes. While this is likely to be the case, let us not forget that it does not eliminate the possibility of class conflict.

#### Activity 2

**How is the modern world different from Marx's ideas. Talk to people and note down your thoughts in your notebook.**

Yet another important factor that has militated against the kind of class conflict engulfing the entire society which Marx had visualised, is the egalitarian principle in the political sphere. Freedom of association has allowed the trade unions and political parties to take up conflict resolution in other than the direction of violent class conflicts. Negotiated settlements in institutionalised frame work was possible. The working class, at least in the organised sector, has been able to secure considerable benefits.

To recapitulate the critique of Marx suggested by Dahrendorf: The predictions Marx had made about homogenisation of classes and the pauperisation of working class giving rise to intense and violent class conflicts has not been borne out by the historical developments, since his time. Three features are of particular importance. First, there has been decomposition of both labour and capital and a new middle class has emerged. Secondly, social mobility has made movement of individuals from one class to another possible. It works against the stability of classes, which in turn reduces the intensity of class conflict. Thirdly, equality in the political sphere has allowed class struggles to be carried out within institutionalised frame works and not necessarily through class wars. Since ownership of property and control are separated and the proletariat is decomposed we cannot visualise an entire society divided in two large warring camps. Classes and conflicts will remain in poor capitalist societies but their nature will be quite different from what Marx had formulated.



Marriage is one way in which mobility takes place

*Courtesy: T. Kapur*



## 7.5 TOWARDS A THEORY OF CLASS CONFLICT

Having shown the shortcomings of the applicability of Marx's theory of class conflict to Industrial societies, due to changed conditions Dahrendorf goes on then to suggest his own formulations on the subject.

In the theoretical corpus of sociology, there have been two distinct orientations. First is the Integration theory of society and second, the Coercion theory of society.

### 7.5.1 Basic Assumptions of Integration and Coercion Theories

The former is founded on four basic assumptions:

- i) Every society is a relatively persistent, stable structure of elements.
- ii) Every society is an ill integrated structure of elements.
- iii) Every element in a society has a function, i.e. renders contribution to its maintenance as a system.
- iv) Every functioning social structure is based on a consensus of values among its members.

The latter i.e. the Coercion theory also exhibits four levels:

- i) Every society is at every point subject to processes change; social change is ubiquitous.
- ii) Every society displays at every point dissensus and conflict; social conflict is ubiquitous.
- iii) Every element in a society renders a contribution to its disintegration and change.
- iv) Every society is based on the coercion of some if its members by others.

He considers both models as complementary rather than competing. For the explanation of formation of conflict groups the second model is appropriate. Given this assumption, Dahrendorf then goes on to provide a set of ideas in the form of propositions. Subsequent analysis and empirical verifications will be needed.

### 7.5.2 Dahrendorf's Theory

Let us examine the ideas contained in his 'Theory of Social Classes and Class Conflict'.

The objective of the exercise is an examination and explanation of structure changes in terms of group conflict. Since the primary interest is on conflict and its consequences, following the coercion model, it is taken as present throughout social structure i.e. ubiquitous. All the elements of the social structure e.g. roles, institutions norms have to do something or other with instability and change. [One may legitimately ask the counter question; How is there unity and coherence then? The answer will be: 'coercion and constraint'].

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In which way does Dahrendorf's theory differ from that of Marx. Answer using about five lines.

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2) Say true or false.

- i) Marx advocated the decomposition of capital
- ii) Dahrendorf feels that class conflict will lead to revolution
- iii) Marx points out that capital leads to Imperatively Coordinated Associations
- iv) Class conflict has consequences for the social structure.

Every theory, however rudimentary it may be, uses a set of concepts which have to be clearly defined so that the statements showing the inter relationships can be clearly understood. Dahrendorf is one of the rare authors who has deliberately chosen to practice what the methodologists often preach but seldom practice.

Since it is a theory dealing with conflict concepts like power, authority have to find a place.

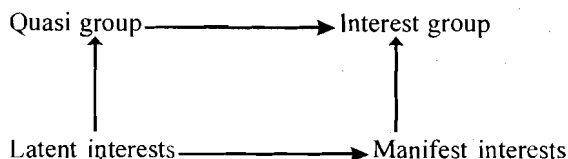
Following, Max Weber, Authority (i.e. legitimate power) then is the probability that an order with specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons. Let it be emphasized that authority is confined to a specific organisation or group. The manager of factory 'A' cannot have authority over workers of factory 'B'. It is confined to his factory only.

#### Box 7.01

**Those who have authority dominate others. Domination is possession of authority. Corollarily, exclusion from authority is subjection. Combining the elements of authority, domination and objection, the domain of enquiry, the imperatively coordinated association is defined. Any association in which live members are subject to authority relations will be called an Imperatively Coordinated Association, (I.C.A. will be used subsequently). It will show asymmetry of relations in terms of domination and subjection.**

Following Marx's ideas on the existential basis of consciousness, class consciousness and fake class consciousness (cf "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself") Dahrendorf distinguishes between latent and manifest interest.

Latent interests are those interests about which the incumbents of the two espousing positions of domination and subjection are unaware. In contrast the manifest interests are articulate and conscious to the individual and lead to opposition to the other. Corresponding to the two kind of interests, collectivities can be classified. The collectivity of individuals having common latent interests is called a quasi group, on the other hand, that which shares manifest interests is called interest groups.



(note that if latent interests become manifest due to structural dynamics of opposition, quasi groups become interest groups)

Having defined these terms Dahrendorf is now ready to define social class. (Remember that ownership will not figure in it as in Marx)

### 7.5.3 Dahrendorf on Social Class

Social classes then are such organised or unorganised collectivities which share latent or manifest interests which arise from the authority structure of imperatively coordinated associations (I.C.A.)

A few important points to note are:

- i) Social class does not encompass all or even most members of a society as a whole. It has relevance only for the given ICA.
- ii) Given the authority structure of an ICA of domination and subjection, only two classes are emergent.
- iii) Social classes are always conflict groups.

Group conflict is the antagonistic relationship between organised collectivities as is based on patterns of social structure. (Not random, not based on psychological factors). In a given I.C.A. class conflict which arises from the authority structure is endemic and ubiquitous. The presence and acting out of class conflict has consequences for structural change. This change can be in the social institutions and/or norms and values. Change can take place in varying degrees of suddenness or radicalness or both. (Note the departure from Marx formulation that structural change is always revolutionary i.e. sudden, radical and violent).

A model of conflict group formation. 'In very imperatively coordinated association, two quasi groups united by common latent interests can be distinguished. Their orientations of interest are determined by possession of or exclusion from authority. From these quasi groups, interest groups are recruited, the articulate programs of which defined or attack the legitimacy of existing authority structures. In any given association, two such groupings are in conflict'. (Dahrendorf, 1959: 183-84)

#### 7.5.4 Consequences for Social Structure

Once conflict groups of the class type are formed in an I.C.A. i.e. in two opposing groups, how does the conflict interaction proceed? What will be the consequences for the social structure in which group conflict is rooted? There are the questions that any theory of conflict has to answer. Dahrendorf has attempted to do so.

To begin with one asks the question regarding the intensity of conflict (which involves 'costs' in case of defeat which factors affect it positively and negatively. Dahrendorf believes that the intensity of class conflict decreases to the extent that conditions for class organisation are present and vice versa. For example, if the workers have opportunities of forming unions and negotiate with management, the worker management conflicts will be less intense. Similarly in states where people can freely form parties and civic association will have less intense conflict, similarly, intensity of group conflict will diminish when the classes in different associations are not superimposed. For example the factory workers are also not from an ethnic minority or low caste. If there is superimposition of the two, the conflict will be more intense.

The intensity of class conflict is also affected by the fact of whether or not different group conflicts in the same society are dissociated. As an example let us suppose that there are three major kind of conflicts in a society: class conflict, ethnic conflict and regional, say, north-south conflict. If the incumbants of position of domination are also from dominant ethnic group and from the north, and those of subjection from a particular subordinate ethnic group and from the south, the intensity of class conflict will be very high.

#### Box 7.02

**It is to be noted that if the distribution of rewards and of authority are dissociated, then also the intensity of class conflict will diminish. Although the exercise of authority and ownership of property tend to coincide, it need not necessarily be so. Those in authority may not own the means of production yet the workers may own shares in the company which employs them. Social mobility does influence the intensity of class conflict. It tends to decrease to the extent the classes are open and not closed. In a caste society where avenues of upward mobility are permanently closed, the intensity of conflict is likely to be higher than in an open class society. The caste conflicts in Bihar are a good example.**

Having discussed the factors that affect the intensity of class conflict, Dahrendorf, then moves on to examine the variables affecting the violence of conflict. We have seen earlier, that he rejects Marx's position that all class conflicts are violent. It also does not mean that it is absent. What is believed is that the degree of violence varies from peaceful to bloody revolutionary conflict.

The conditions of class organisation prevalent in an ICA is negatively related to the violence of class conflict (cf unionisation and peaceful collective bargaining in a factory). Dahrendorf also believes that if relative deprivation replaces absolute deprivation in the subject classes, the violence of class conflict is reduced. Yet another factor affecting the degree of violence is the regulation of conflict. By regulation of conflict is meant the mechanisms and procedures that deal with the expression of conflict and not either with its resolution or suppression. To begin with, both parties must recognise that the conflict is real and necessary. Calling the other party's claim as 'unrealistic' is not regulation. It must be recognised that the 'other' has a case. Conflict regulation is more likely to occur when the opposing groups are organised as interest groups. In case of unorganised groups regulation is difficult. For example if there is only one workers' union in a factory, both the management and workers can work out effective strategies for dealing with the issues involved in conflict.

Finally, if both the parties agree on certain formal 'rules of the game', conflict is better regulated. As in most democratic countries of the world India has evolved procedures for industrial conflict regulation e.g. negotiations, mediations, arbitration and adjudication; strike being the last resort.

As class conflict takes place in an association, given its varying intensity and violence, it has consequences for the structure. Two kind of structure changes have been identified by Dahrendorf: suddenness and radicalness. The term structure change is to be applied when there are changes in the personnel of positions of domination and subjection in I.C.A.s. An extreme case will be when all the positions of authority are taken over by members of the erstwhile subject class, such as for example, in a revolution. More often than not, however, there is partial replacement.

By radicalness of structure change is meant the significance of consequences and ramifications of such change. It should be noted that many sudden changes may not necessarily be radical. For example a coup de tat by one general against another will bring about considerable changes in personnel, but will heavily change either the institutional or the normative order prevalent in the state.

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## 7.6 LET US SUM UP

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The 'Grand Theory' of Marx with its global vision and revolutionary zeal has had strong emotional reactions both positive and negative. It has changed the course of human history. Over the years however there has been a quiet dispassionate examination of his writings.

Marx's vision of total social transformation of the inequitous, inhuman capitalist system by a revolutionary well organised working class hasn't really worked out. The concepts of class and class conflict that he had used have had tremendous impact, in social sciences. Many scholars adopted them in their entirety; some with modification.

Both Coser and Dahrendorf belong to the later category. Both of them see the significance of class, but not its nature. The entire society may not be divided in two warring classes. They are 'groups' in a society having interests which are opposed to those of other groups. Conflict is not merely positional, it is interactive; not only structural but also processual. It also has a psychological counterpart in interest, consciousness, and in emotional costs. Finally, it has consequences for the social structure. These may be both positive and negative. They may tend to stabilize the given structure or to change it in various ways. It depends upon a number of variables which may be empirically operating.

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## 7.7 KEY WORDS

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- Capitalism** : The system in which there are owners of the means of production and the workers. This leads to an exploitation of the latter by the former.
- Conflict** : The opposing stance and action of two or more antagonistic groups
- Egalitarian** : The principle that each individual/group must have equal status and opportunity.
- Decomposition** : The breaking down of a class or group into smaller groups, e.g. that of labour and capital based groups.
- Function** : The part a component plays in the integration of a whole e.g. the part economy plays in integrating society.

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## 7.8 FURTHER READINGS

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Coser, A. 1956. *Function of Social Conflict*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Dahrendorf, R. 1959. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

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## 7.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Conflict has several functions. Firstly conflict with other groups leads to integration and solidarity within the same group. Further the whole system is maintained by what may be termed as a balance of aversions the groups have for the another. However sometimes what happens is that an out group(s) instead of creating a hostile response actually becomes a positive reference group. This is called anticipatory socialization, and has been stressed even in the caste system through the process termed 'Sanskritization'.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The theory of Marx predicts revolutionary change due to polarization of classes in the system of capitalism. Dahrendorf points out due to decomposition of labour and capital, and due to social mobility such a revolution and polarization of classes will not occur. Thus industrial society defuses the tensions through the various processes mentioned above.
- 2) i) False  
ii) False  
iii) False  
iv) True.

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# UNIT 8 THEORIES OF STRATIFICATION: TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS LENSKI, LUHMANN, BERGHE

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## Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Social Stratification: Divergent Explanations of the Same Phenomenon
- 8.3 The Contemporary Sociological Perspectives on Stratification
- 8.4 The Functionalist Perspective
- 8.5 The Conflict Approach
- 8.6 Towards a Synthesis
  - 8.6.1 Early Attempts
- 8.7 Berghe: Towards A Grand Synthesis
- 8.8 Luhmann: A Systems Theory
- 8.9 Lenski: Power and Privilege
- 8.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.11 Key Words
- 8.12 Further Readings
- 8.13 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 8.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you should be able to :

- provide contemporary perspectives on social stratification;
- outline the grand synthesis of Berghe;
- describe the Systems Theory of Luhmann; and
- discuss the power and privilege theory of Lenski.

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## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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This lesson attempts to use the method of dialectics to understand the progress made in the literature on the subject of social stratification. Our specific focus will be on the writings of three sociologists Pierre van den Berghe, N. Luhmann and Gerhard Lenski, who have tried to go beyond the existing polarities in the theories of social stratification and have attempted to synthesize them into a unified theory. We shall first identify the two opposing viewpoints on the phenomenon of social inequality, i.e., the conservatives who advocate that social inequalities are natural and justified and the radicals who believe in principle of treating all human beings equally and see this as an achievable social and political goal. We can observe two parallel trends in the sociological literature on social stratification as well: the structural-functionalism representing the conservative trend and the conflict or the Marxist approach representing the radical perspective. In the following sections we shall see how a syntheses of the two opposing theories have been attempted by the above mentioned three sociologists.

## 8.2 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: DIVERGENT EXPLANATIONS OF THE SAME PHENOMENON

Social inequality or social stratification is a universal phenomenon. Some degree of inequality in property, prestige and power is found virtually in all the contemporary societies. The available historical evidence suggests that such inequalities had been characteristic of the past societies as well. Further, inequalities are socially patterned and there is some degree of legitimacy granted to them by the society. In other words, laws and norms of a given collectivity govern the prevailing systems of inequality. It is for this reason that the phenomenon of social stratification has been an important question for sociologists and the other social scientists. They have written a great deal on the subject, both in terms of descriptive accounts of the prevailing structures and practices of inequalities in different societies as well as in terms of providing explanations or theorizing the phenomenon.

Apart from sociologists and other social scientists, the phenomenon of social inequality has been a major concern among lay thinkers, philosophers and religious leaders for a long time. While certain religions, such as Hinduism, justify inequalities among the different caste groups, other religious philosophies preached against practicing inequality and appealed to their followers to treat all human individuals equally. Similarly, the modern Western thinkers and philosophers have also been divided on the subject. There have been debates on the question 'whether it is right and justified to treat human beings differently and reward them unequally?' We can identify two different positions on the subject. While some have taken a conservative position, others have developed a critique of the existing systems of inequalities and have offered radical alternatives (Lenski, 1966).

The conservative thinkers of modern Europe tried to argue that since social inequalities are found everywhere, they are natural and inevitable. In other words, they justified the existence of inequalities on various grounds. Adam Smith, a leading liberal philosopher of the modern West and founder of the modern economics, justified social inequalities by arguing in favour of the free market system. The market place where individuals pursue their private interests without any interference of political authority or moral principle of distribution tests the capabilities of different individuals and rewards them differently depending on their competence.

Similarly, those influenced by Darwin's theory of natural selection also justified the existence of inequalities among men. The social Darwinians argued that individual men were sifted and sorted like plant and animal species. Through this process of selection, those who possessed better qualities rose to positions of prominence in society while others formed the working masses. W.G. Sumner, for example, argued in his well-known book *Folkways* that 'class based inequalities were essentially a measure of the social worth of men, which in turn was basically a measure of their native ability'. The well-known Italian scholar Gaetano Mosca was another proponent of the conservative thesis. He too insisted that inequalities were an inevitable fact of life. Since human societies could never function without political organization, these organizations necessarily led to inequalities in power.

However, there has also been a long tradition of radical thinking in the modern Western philosophy that argues against the conservative position. The radicals have all along been emphasizing on the point that treating human beings unequally was morally wrong. They have also been arguing that it was possible to build a society where all individuals could be treated equally with equal rights. Scholars like Locke and Rousseau strongly argued that in modern democracies, all human beings should possess equal political rights. Among all the classical thinkers of modern Europe, it is in the writings of Marx and Engels that we find a most systematic and well-developed critique of the conservative position. In their writings on the political economy of capitalist development, they also offered a radical anti-thesis of the conservative or the "liberal bourgeois" position in form of the socialist theory.

### 8.3 THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON STRATIFICATION

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As mentioned above, we can observe interesting parallels in the manner in which the phenomenon of social inequality was explained by classical thinkers of modern Europe and the ways in which contemporary sociological theories deal with the subject of social stratification. The two dominant perspectives on the subject, the functionalist theory and the conflict theory, resemble very closely the conservative and radical viewpoints presented above. Both these perspectives begin with a normative position on the subject. The functionalist perspective or the consensus approach emphasizes on the inevitability of social inequality and the positive function that it performs for the social system. The conflict theory, on the other hand, looks at the phenomenon in terms of interests that the given structures of inequality in a particular society fulfil for certain individuals and groups at the cost of others. Hence they highlight the illegitimacy and the negative side of it.

### 8.4 THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

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As we know, the functionalist or the structural-functionalist theories tend to look at society as an organically integrated system where different parts or units work to fulfil the essential needs of the system. They look at social stratification too in functionalist terms, i.e. in terms of the needs that the patterns of social inequality fulfil for the society as a whole. Thus for them social inequality is not merely an inevitable fact but also an essential requirement of the system. Talcott Parsons and Kingsley Davis are the leading functionalist theorists who have written on social stratification.

As mentioned above, the basic premise of the functionalist position is that stratification arises out of the needs of societies and not from the needs and desires of individuals. According to Parsons, in every society there are certain shared values that arise out of the needs of that society. Since the needs of all societies are more or less similar, these values also tend to be similar the world over. What differs is the relative ranking of these values. One society may value efficiency more than stability while another may reverse the order but every society must value both stability as well efficiency to some degree. The system of social stratification is essentially an expression of the value system of that society. The positions that measure up to the standards set by the society are rewarded more than those that are valued less.

Similarly, Davis argues that stratification arises in response to two specific needs common to every human society. First, the most important positions in society ought to be fulfilled by the most competent individuals and second, the society must reward those occupying important positions better than those occupying less important positions. "Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons."

Davis identifies two important factors that determine the magnitude of rewards attached to highly ranked position: 1) their functional importance for the society and 2) the relative scarcity of qualified personnel in that category. For example, a doctor is functionally more important for society than a sweeper. And being qualified to be a doctor requires longer period of training that makes their availability scarce in society. Hence higher rewards for the doctor. Since all positions can never be of equal importance, nor all men equally qualified for the important positions, inequality is inevitable. Not only is it inevitable, as Davis argues, it is necessarily beneficial to everyone since the survival and well being of every individual is contingent on the survival and well being of society.

### 8.5 THE CONFLICT APPROACH

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The conflict approach draws its inspiration from the writings of Karl Marx who developed an elaborate critique of the capitalist social order and argued for a socialist society based on the principle of social equality among all. As Lenski argues, Marx was the first scholar to offer a 'radical antithesis' to the 'conservative thesis' developed by the liberal economists and the functionalist sociologists.



### Activity 1

**Do the differing functional and conflict perspectives allow for a common approach. If so how? Discuss with students in the study centre and write a note in your notebook.**

In contrast to the functionalists, the conflict theories do not approach the problem of social stratification by identifying an abstract notion of society with its own need. They view society as being formed by various individuals and groups and their needs and interests. It is these needs and interests that become the starting point for the conflict theorists. While the functionalists have no place for the concept of power in their analysis of society and social inequality, the conflict theorists begin with the question of power. Society for them is a stage where struggles take place among different groups and individuals over the available scarce resources and the socially valued positions. Those who are powerful use their strength to corner the valued positions. Those who are powerful use their strength to corner the valued resources. It is the domination of some groups over the others that perpetuates social inequality in society. For example those who are rich are able to send their wards to good schools and it is because of this that they are able to compete for the positions that are valued better. Since the poor cannot even afford to send their children to ordinary schools they can never compete with the rich and the powerful. Comparing the two schools of thought, Lenski writes:

Where the functionalists emphasize the common interests shared by the members of a society, conflict theorists emphasize the interests which divide. Where functionalists stress the common advantages which accrue from social relationships, conflict theorists emphasize the element of domination and exploitation. Where functionalists emphasize consensus as the basis of social unity, conflict theorists emphasize coercion. Where functionalists see human societies as social systems, conflict theorists see them as stages on which struggles for power and privilege take place (Lenski, 1966: 16-17).

The two schools of thought are generally seen as being totally opposed to each other. However, some scholars have also argued that there are many things common in the two perspectives. They argue that conflict and consensus are two sides of the same coin. A sociological theory should be able to take into account all the aspects of social reality. Some sociologists have even attempted to go beyond the polarities and develop a unified theory of society and social stratification that attempts to bring the two viewpoints together. Scholars like Dahrendorf, Lenski, Berghe and Luhmann are among those who have tried to go beyond the polarities and have attempted syntheses of the two perspectives.

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## 8.6 TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS

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It was the German philosopher, Hegel who through his theory of dialectics popularized the term synthesis. According to him, ideas or human thinking progresses through a process of opposition or negation. A particular idea or a 'thesis' leads to the development of an opposite idea or an 'anti-thesis'. Through a process of dialectics, there emerges a synthesis, another idea that integrates the valid points of both, the thesis as well as the anti-thesis, and approaches the question at a different level. As pointed out by Lenski, 'whereas both thesis and anti-thesis are essentially normative theories of inequality, i.e, essentially concerned with moral evaluation and the question of justice, the synthesis is essentially analytical, i.e; concerned with empirical relationships and their causes'. Or in other words, while thesis and anti-thesis are arguments made from ideological standpoints, synthesis relies on mobilization of empirical data. It is a result of modern application of the scientific method to the study of the age-old problem of human inequality.

### 8.6.1 Early Attempts

The earliest attempts to go beyond the conservative and radical positions on the question of social inequality could be seen in the writings of the German sociologist, Max Weber. Though he did not consciously attempt a synthesis of the two traditions, his writings on

subjects like class, power and prestige reflect an analytical treatment that incorporates valid insights from both the perspectives and goes beyond the polarities or moral positions. For example, in his discussion on the concept of class, though he agrees with Marx that it is an important aspect of the social structure, he does not subscribe to Marx's view that the existence of class inevitably leads to class conflict or class struggle. Similarly, unlike Marx, he does not look at the phenomenon of 'power' and 'prestige' as being always reducible to 'class'. And still he claims that he has basically attempted to advance what had been said on the structure of capitalist societies.

Apart from Weber, one can see attempts to synthesize the two perspectives on social stratification in the writings of Vilfred Pareto, Pitirim Sorokin and Stanislaw Ossowski. More recently, Pierre van den Berghe, Gerhard Lenski and Luhmann have made such attempts.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Compare and contrast the Conflict and Functional approaches to social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Outline the early attempts towards a synthesis of social stratification approaches. Use about five lines for your answer.

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**8.7 PIERRE VAN DEN BERGHE**

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In one of his research articles, 'Dialectic and Functionalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis' published in the American Sociological Review in 1963. Pierre van den Berghe tried to identify the common elements in the two major traditions of sociological theorizing by using the Hegelian concept of synthesis.

He argues that Functionalism and Marxian conflict theory each stresses one of two essential aspects of social reality. "Not only does each theory emphasize one of two aspects of social reality which are complementary and inextricably intertwined, but some of the analytical concepts are applicable to both approaches" (Berghe, 1963: 703). However, it is not enough to say that the two theories are complementary. One should be able to show their reconcilability. According to Berghe, by retaining and modifying elements of the two approaches, one can develop such a unified theory of society. He shows that the two theories converge on four important points.

First, both the approaches are holistic in character as they both look at society as a system with interrelated and interdependent parts. However, the two theories have opposite views on the interrelationship of different parts. While functionalism emphasizes on the

reciprocal interdependence of parts, the dialectical theory talks about the conflictual relations among the different parts of the system. However, both the theories have been criticised for overemphasizing one at the cost of the other. The concept of system thus needs to include both, interdependence as well as conflict.

### Activity 2

**What is the justification for a grand synthesis of stratification theories? Discuss with students in the study centre and write a brief note in your notebook.**

Second, their concern with regard to conflict and consensus also tends to overlap. Whereas functionalism regards consensus as major focus of stability and integration, the dialectical theory views conflict as a source of disintegration and revolution. However, according to Berghe, the two can be reconciled into a single theory. For example, Coser has pointed to the integrative and stabilizing aspect of conflict. Instead of leading to disintegration, conflict can help the system to retain a dynamic equilibrium. Furthermore, in a number of societies, conflict is institutionalized and ritualized in a manner that seems conducive to integration. In industrial societies, for example, the existence of trade unions of the working class help in regulating industrial relations and they work as safety valves against the possibility of a disintegrative kind of class conflict. Similarly excessive unity among different groups can also lead to inter-group conflict in a plural society where diverse cultural groups live together.

Thirdly, both functionalism and the conflict/dialectical theory share the evolutionary notion of social change. Though their notion of stages and processes involved in the course of historical change differ, they both nevertheless believe in the idea of progress. While the Marxian dialectical theory visualizes a process of change taking place through class struggle, functionalists attribute this change to a continuous process of social differentiation. However, as Berghe argues, the two theories of change have at least one important point in common: both theories hold that a given state of the social system presupposes all previous stages, and, hence, contains them, if only in residual or modified form.

Fourthly, Berghe claims that both functionalism and dialectic-conflict theories are based on "an equilibrium model". In the case of functionalism, this is obvious. But the dialectic sequence of thesis-antithesis-synthesis also involves a notion of equilibrium. The dialectic conceives of society as going through alternating phases of equilibrium and disequilibrium. While the notion of equilibrium in the dialectical theory is different from the classical notion of dynamic equilibrium, the views are neither contradictory nor incompatible with a postulate of long-range tendency towards integration.

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## 8.8 N. LUHMANN: A SYSTEMS THEORY

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More recently, N. Luhmann has tried to develop a theory of social system that deals with the basic problem of social sciences. He has tried to go beyond the existing explanations of the phenomenon of social stratification and has offered an analytically synthesized view of the subject. A sociological theory of society, according to Luhmann, must incorporate into it a general theory of systems, a general theory of evolution, and a general theory of communication. They have to be seen as being mutually interdependent. Similarly, a general theory of society has to go beyond the dichotomies of 'stability or change; structure or process; consensus or conflict. A theory of conflict must also provide a theory of consensus, a theory of processes must also explain structures, and so forth'.

### Box 8.01

**Much of the existing literature on social stratification or social inequality tends to deal with the phenomenon from a moralistic perspective, i.e., by looking at it in terms of being "good" or "bad". While the Marxist scholars and the conflict theorists tend to look at it in terms of domination and exploitation and hence view it as being essentially bad, the functionalist theory by talking about the societal needs that stratification system fulfils end up justifying it. Luhmann looks at the phenomenon of social stratification from an evolutionary perspective.**

He has argued that it would be misleading to focus exclusively on the issue of subordination-domination/exploitation or to seek to justify it by invoking the unifying functions that it performs for the society. Stratification was initially a result of growth in the size and complexity of society. As the society grew in size and scale, it became impossible for all the members of a society to interact with each other at personal or face-to-face level. The process of “social communication” required a “selective intensifier” Stratification provided the way out. It differentiated society into unequal subsystems. While inequality became a norm at the level of social system and its interaction with environment, equality became the guiding principle within the subgroup, a norm regulating communication and social interaction among the members of a particular stratum.

The process of differentiation that begins with a growth and complexity of society initially, gives rise to a segmental division in society. Caste system is a classical example of such a segmental division. The role differentiation at this stage is at the level of families and each segment is a closed stratum. However, as the process of differentiation progresses, it gives way to an open class-like system of stratification ‘that is continually reproduced by the effects of functional differentiation’.

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## 8.9 GERHARD LENSKI: POWER AND PRIVILEGE

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Among the three scholars discussed in this lesson, it is in the works of Gerltard Lenski that one finds a most systematic attempt at developing a synthesis of the different theories of social stratification. In the introductory chapter of his well known book *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, Lenski clarifies that his attempt at developing a synthesized theory of social stratification focuses on three important questions. First, he focuses on the causes of stratification rather than its consequences as has been done by most others. Second, as is suggested in the title of his focus, his main focus is on power and privilege rather than prestige. Finally, he equates social stratification with distributive process in human societies—the process by which scarce goods and values are distributed.

Historically speaking, the question of distribution and social inequality assume significance only when the societies begin to produce surplus, i.e., more than what is required for the survival of the given population. The core question for Lenski is ‘who gets what and why?’ His answer is rather simple and clear. “The distribution of rewards in a society is a function of the distribution of power”. This answer is counter posed to the answer suggested by the structural functionalists who explain the differential distribution of rewards in terms of functional needs of the social system. Though his answer to the question of ‘who gets what and why?’ appears to be rather simple, his overall theory of social stratification is quite an elaborate one. Lenski has offered a multidimensional view of the working of the distribution system that determines the structure of power and privilege in society.

### Box 8.02

**Structure of the distribution system is made up of three types of units: individuals, classes and class systems. Each of these is linked to the other and represents a different level of organization within a distributive system. Individuals, for Lenski, work at the basic level of the system but they constitute units within classes. The classes, in turn, are the units within class systems.**

Lenski’s notion of class, however, is very different from that Karl Marx or Max Weber. While Marx and Weber define class primarily in economic terms and treat it as being a part of the economic system of the society, Lenski uses the term in a very broad sense and emphasizes more on its political dimension. As mentioned above, for Lenski, stratification is a multidimensional phenomenon and therefore he rejects a single dimensional definition of class. Human societies are stratified in various ways, and each of these alternative modes of stratification provides a basis for different conception of class. Thus classes are not merely aggregation of individuals who share common economic status in society or a common position in the structure of production. There can be different types of classes, i.e., political classes, ethnic classes and prestige classes.

He defines class as “an aggregation of persons in society who stand in a similar position with respect to some form of power, privilege or prestige” (Lenski, 1966:74-75). However, he clarifies that if one has to explain the phenomenon of social stratification or answer the question ‘who gets what and why?’ Power and class must be our chief concern. Prestige and privilege are largely determined by the distribution of power. By power, Lenski means all those individuals who have access to the institutional sources of power or who have the legitimate right or capability of using force. Thus, in his definition of class, the most crucial element is that of power.

However, the manner in which he defines power and class, a single individual can be member of more than one class. For example, in contemporary Indian society, an individual can be a member of the middle class with respect to property holdings, a member of the working class by virtue of his job in a factory and a member of subordinate ethnic class in terms of his being a dalit by caste. Each of the major roles he occupies, as well as his status in the property hierarchy, influences his chances of obtaining the things he seeks in life and thus each places him in a specific class. This tendency towards multidimensionality of class statuses, according to Lenski becomes more pronounced as one moves from technologically primitive societies to technologically advanced societies.

He further argues that every unequal or stratified system has a potential of conflict. The members of every class share common interests with one another, and these shared interests constitute a potential basis of hostility toward other classes. The members of a given class have a vested interest in protecting and increasing the values of their common resources and in reducing the value of the resources of the opposite classes. However, he does not claim that classes always act together or that they are aware of their common interests. Nor are they always hostile to the opposite classes. A given class structure spells out the possibilities that could be realized, but there is nothing inevitable about them.

The final element in his theory of social stratification is the concept of **class systems**. A class system, according to Lenski is defined as ‘a hierarchy of classes ranked in terms of some single criterion’. However, there is no single class system. He argues that once we recognize the fact that power has diverse basis, and that these are not always reducible to some single common denominator, we are forced to think in terms of series of class hierarchies and class systems.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Outline Berghe’s theory of social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Give a brief note on N. Luhmann’s Systems Theory of social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 3) Delineate the position of power and privilege in Lenski's theory of social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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## 8.10 LET US SUM UP

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The issue of social inequality or social stratification has been one of the most widely debated questions. It is not only sociologists who have provided conflicting theoretical explanations of the phenomenon but it has also been a contentious issue among the lay thinkers, philosophers and religious leaders. Though attempts have been made at synthesizing the conflicting theories by many sociologists, three of whom we have discussed above, the existing status of the question is far from satisfactory. The syntheses or the unified theories suggested by Berghe, Luhmann or Lenski have not been accepted by all the sociologists. Most functionalists remain committed to their position and so is true of the Marxists or the other conflict theorists. Professional sociologists as well as lay thinkers continue to disagree on the causes and consequences of stratification.

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## 8.11 KEY WORDS

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<b>Conflict Approach</b>	: The approach in which stratification is seen as a result of two opposing classes. The class which owns means of production exploits the working class.
<b>Functional Approach</b>	: The approach in which every position and status in society is seen as contributing to the maintenance and solidarity of the society.
<b>Synthesis</b>	: This refers to an attempt to put divergent approaches to social stratification under a single approach which draws strands from other approaches.

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## 8.12 FURTHER READINGS

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Berghe, Pierre van den (1963), 'Dialectic and Functionalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis', *American Sociological Review*, 28, pp. 695-705.

Lenski, G. (1966), *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*. New York, McGraw Hill Book Company.

Luhmann, N. (1995), *Social Systems*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

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## 8.13 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Functionalists tend to look at Society as an organically linked system where different parts fulfill the essential needs of the system. It is the system or society that have 'needs'. Further the system of social stratification is an expression of the value system of that society. The conflict theorists on the other hand begins with the notion of

power. In society struggles take place for socially valued positions. Thus while functionalists stress shared interests, the conflict theorists emphasize the element of domination and exploitation.

- 2) It was Hegel who popularized the term synthesis, which relies on empirical data on human inequality. Early attempts at synthesis in social stratification studies go back to Max Weber. Webers writings go beyond polarities or moral positions. Thus Weber disagrees with Marx on class, power and prestige in an attempt to 'advance' Marx on capitalism. Other early attempts include the works of Pareto, Sorokin and Ossowski.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Berghe's theory of stratifications is an attempt at grand synthesis. He feels functionalism and Marxism each stress one aspect of social reality. He feels that these theories converge in that they are: i) holistic, ii) they share evolutionary notion of social change iii) are based on an equilibrium model.
- 2) Luhmann has forwarded a systems theory of social stratification. His theory incorporates a theory of evolution and that of communication. Luhmann does not favour conflict or consensus as ultimate indicators. He feels that society grew from face-to-face interaction into large numbers and thus unequal subsystems came into being, e.g. caste. As society evolves it becomes more and more open and class-like according to Luhman.
- 3) Lenski focuses in his work on i) causes of social stratification, ii) power and privilege, iii) distribution process. Lenski points out that when surpluses are produced the question of distribution arises and with it social inequality. The distribution system is itself made up of individuals, classes and class systems. Thus for Lenski similarity in power, privilege or prestige is what constitutes a class. His definition, thus, is multidimensional and forces us to think in terms of a series of class hierarchies and class systems.



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