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

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

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.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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.

8.6 TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS

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

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.

8.8 N. LUHMANN: A SYSTEMS THEORY

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’.

8.9 GERHARD LENSKI: POWER AND PRIVILEGE

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

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.

8.11 KEY WORDS

- Conflict Approach** : 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.
- Functional Approach** : The approach in which every position and status in society is seen as contributing to the maintenance and solidarity of the society.
- Synthesis** : This refers to an attempt to put divergent approaches to social stratification under a single approach which draws strands from other approaches.

8.12 FURTHER READINGS

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.

8.13 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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.

NOTES