Social Stratification

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Definition of the concept

The expression ‘social stratification’ refers to the positions held by individuals and groups in the structures of inequality existing in a society. Specifically, it denotes the classification of individuals and groups into different categories on the basis of the amount of one or more privileges enjoyed by the members of each category and/or the intensity of power that they are able to exert over other people. In contemporary advanced societies, based on democratic political regimes and market economies, these categories are usually referred to as strata or classes, depending on the criteria chosen to identify them. Strata and classes are groups based on factual inequalities; that is to say, disparities produced by the workings of societies with legal systems stipulating the perfect equality of all citizens before the law. Hence strata and classes are open groups that individuals can enter or leave according to the acquisition or the loss, during their lives, of the characteristics defining membership of a specific class or stratum. By contrast, in most traditional societies social inequalities were based on legal and/or religious rules that led to the formation of closed groups – such as castes, orders, or estates – to which people belonged from birth and for their entire lifetimes, with no chance of escaping from their initial condition.

Social stratification systems of advanced societies

From an analytical point of view, the advanced societies comprise a plurality of institutional orders characterised by distinct systems of social stratification. For instance, within the political sphere, heads of states, prime ministers, and ministers of central governments perform more crucial roles and hold superior positions compared with those performed and held by members of parliaments,

mayors, members of city councils and the like. The latter, in their turn, are politically more influential than simple citizens. Indeed, even mayors and members of city councils can i) take decisions regarding the needs and interests of different people and the whole community; and ii) frame these decisions in legal rules. No simple citizen has this authority. However, some simple citizens can perform commanding roles in the economic sphere as chief executive officers of big corporations or proprietors of medium and small-sized firms. Chief executive officers and entrepreneurs can determine the goals of their companies and firms, their organisational features, and the tasks undertaken by their managers and professionals. In their turn, managers and professionals are responsible for organizing the work? of routine non-manual employees, foremen, skilled and unskilled manual workers. Obviously no white- or blue-collar worker can take any decision regarding the firm's economic strategies and organisational arrangements. As a consequence, they are placed at the bottom of the stratification system of the economic realm. Yet even national politicians have no direct role to perform in this sphere, and in no sense can they be considered as holding top positions in the relevant stratification system. Similar situations can be observed in the cultural and educational sphere, in the religious realm, and so on.

Though largely independent, the main institutional orders of contemporary advanced societies are not reciprocally disconnected. On the contrary, they are functionally interdependent. Educational systems and universities are required to produce not only intellectuals but also skilled workers for the economy. Moreover, a high level of schooling can be a useful asset to spend in the political and economic arenas. In their turn, the workings of the economy, besides the availability of suitably skilled labour?, depend closely on infrastructural interventions, trade and tax policies, labour-market regulations, welfare and educational measures decided by central and local governments. Politics can take even more incisive action? in the economic realm by determining specific financial support in favour of individual sectors or firms in order to prevent unemployment episodes or to guarantee the survival of economic activities considered as a crucial national or local assets. In parallel, the economy, through taxation, supplies politics with the financial resources

needed to develop public policies and to pay the costs of political assemblies, related bureaucratic bodies and administrative staffs, the army, and so on. Furthermore, companies, firms and actors with higher positions in the economic sphere can influence the workings of the political realm by selectively funding parties and politicians.

Owing to the functional interdependence among institutional orders, those who perform superior roles and hold higher positions in one such order can influence both their counterparts in other orders and, even more so, those occupying subordinate roles in them. As a consequence, the incumbents of higher positions in the political system, for instance, are usually able to secure advantages for themselves, civil servants, and related social groups. In a similar way, people in higher positions within the cultural sphere are frequently able to obtain sizeable material and symbolic privileges. Moreover, they are quite often able to use these advantages and their cultural capital to achieve desirable standings in the political or economic sphere. Obviously, the same holds for the incumbents of higher roles in the economic or other institutional realms. Also these may spend their power and privileges to obtain social acknowledgments and honours and to pursue political careers. By contrast, people occupying lower positions within an institutional order can only with difficulty compensate for their disadvantages by exerting some kind of influence in other social realms. It is decidedly more likely that they will play subordinate roles in the latter as well.

It is precisely because advantages and power linked to one specific structure of inequality can be transformed into advantages and power linked to other forms of social disparity that most social scientists maintain that, in contemporary advanced societies, there exists a general system of stratification. This general system is thought to be much more important than those existing within each ?individual institutional orders: firstly, because it involves all members of a society, and secondly because it concerns the overall living conditions of persons and groups.

As implicitly stated above, the roles underlying the positions held in specific systems of stratification are usually made up of occupations. This is all the more so in the case of a general stratification system. Obviously, occupation is not the sole feature conditioning the allocation of

persons and groups in specific and general systems of stratification. Gender, generation, race, ethnicity, educational credentials, level of technical skills, type of social competencies, and so on, can operate as factors generating several specific forms of inequality and hence influence individuals' positions in the relevant stratification systems. Yet the vast majority of social scientists maintain that, in advanced societies, several inequalities – and hence the overall social positions of persons – mainly depend on the occupation that they (or the members of their household) perform. Indeed, crucial aspects of the disparities observed in people's living conditions – such as income, consumption, prestige, health, psychological well-being – are deeply affected by occupations. As a consequence, all the schemes developed by social scientists during the last fifty years to represent the main features of general stratification systems have used occupations as their observation units.

Despite this basic similarity, the stratification schemes and measures developed by social scientists differ substantially. A fundamental distinction can be drawn according to which aspect of social inequality – distributional or relational – is the main concern. Distributional disparities refer to the amount of a privilege, or a set of privileges, enjoyed by different groups of people. Relational inequalities concern power disparities occurring between these groups and their capacity both to condition the conduct of other groups and successfully fulfill their interests and choices. These two aspects of inequality are connected. Power is a means to achieve social advantages, while advantages can be used as assets to achieve power. However, precisely because they are conceptually distinguished, the distributional and relational aspects of social inequalities can be studied separately.

Social strata and occupational stratification scales

Some scholars focus on the distributional aspect, arguing that it is more directly linked to the disparities among the living conditions of individuals and groups. As a consequence, they maintain that general stratification systems are made up of strata. Indeed, a social stratum can be defined as a

set of individuals and families who share similar living conditions because they enjoy similar amounts of one or more advantages. Strata form a linear hierarchy in which each of them (except the highest and the lowest) is adjacent to other two strata: one standing above and one standing below it. The reason why strata form a completely ordered hierarchy is that privileges are gradational properties. For instance, it may happen that the poorest family in a country does not possess anything. But it is not true that the wealthiest family possesses the entire national wealth. It possesses only a part of it. Moreover, between the poorest and the wealthiest families lies numerous other families who own intermediate amounts of wealth. In principle, one may say that each individual person or family possesses a different amount of wealth, and hence that the number of strata identifiable on the basis of the distribution of this characteristic is virtually infinite. Yet social scientists tend to identify a discrete and reasonably small number of positions by grouping together persons and families with similar amounts of privilege(s) and hence rather similar living standards.

Usually, individuals and families are grouped in each social stratum by means of statistical procedures which lead to the specification of stratification scales where each stratum is given a specific score (and hence a rank). In their turn, the scores are intended to measure the entire range of inequality underlying the distribution of one or more privileges, to define the distances (in terms of strength of inequality) between the various strata, and to express the specific position occupied by a given stratum in a stratification system.

Social scientists have developed stratification scales of various kinds. A first distinction differentiates between analytic and synthetic scales. The former refer to just one privilege, while the latter pay attention to (more or less formally specified) combinations of several privileges. Analytic scales mainly regard income and prestige. Income scales are intended to identify the economic disparities among socio-occupational strata, while those based on prestige (in the strict meaning of the term) are intended to identify status groups and the amount of honour, deference, respect and social consideration that they receive. Synthetic scales intend to measure the overall social standing of socio-occupational strata by combining two or more privileges – for instance, income level,

amount of social prestige, intensity of psychological gratification, degree of autonomy in performing job tasks – typically associated with the occupations belonging to a stratum.

Besides their synthetic or analytic character, socio-occupational scales can be distinguished on the basis of the information used in their construction. Objective scales rely on data sets recording factual properties of occupations (such as the amount of salary or wages, the intensity of unemployment risks) or their incumbents (such as education level, technical skills, the occupations of friends and spouses). Subjective or reputational scales are based on surveys that collect popular evaluations of the overall social standing of occupations. To be noted is that, despite their subjective foundations and the quite strong changes undergone by the occupational structures of advanced societies, these scales prove to be rather stable over time and across countries. This indicates that the mechanisms underlying the generation of socio-occupational strata are similar in most countries with a market economy and a democratic political regime, and that the new occupations produced by technological progress do not alter the basic features of individual strata and the related stratification system.

Social classes and class schemes

Class schemes furnish representations of social stratification alternative to those based on socio-occupational strata and scales. A class can be defined as a social category made up of individuals and families who possess the same power assets and hence hold the same positions in the overall system of social relations of domination and subordination existing in a society. The reason why some scholars prefer to represent social stratification in terms of class schemes is quite simple. They argue that distributive inequalities ultimately depend on relational disparities.

Most class schemes envisage stratification structures based on a rather small number (5-15) of different positions, i.e. different classes. This is so because power resources (or effective combinations of some of them) are rather scarce, and the control exerted over each of them by

individual classes is either (almost) complete or (almost) non-existent. Indeed, if a power resource were gradually? distributed between classes, no class could dominate another one. As classes are rooted in relational inequalities, they do not necessarily form a linear hierarchical order. It may happen that two or more classes, controlling different power resources, stand in a position of reciprocal equilibrium. Nonetheless, classes give rise to a partially ordered social hierarchy in which higher classes dominate all the remaining ones, and in which middle classes are dominated by higher ones but in their turn dominate lower classes.

Because the amount of the power asset controlled by members of a given class can vary, as well as their ability and opportunities to exploit it, classes are internally stratified. However, according to scholars who adopt a class perspective, the inequalities in living standards? that may occur within classes are markedly smallerthan those observed between classes. Despite the unavoidable internal heterogeneity of classes, the boundaries among them are far less conventional than those drawn among strata. Indeed, it is the control, or the lack of control, over power resources, rather than the decisions of scholars, that automatically define the class positions and the class memberships of individuals and groups.

Most class analysts maintain that, in advanced societies, the process of class formation is mainly influenced by power relations in the economic sphere. In their turn, these power relations depend on the power assets controlled by the members of individual classes. Four types of power assets are usually identified: a) means of production; b) educational qualifications and technical skills; c) labour-power; . and d) control over organisations exerted by high and mid-grade managers and civil servants.

Power resources are not equally effective. Control over means of production and organisations furnishes greater power than that afforded by the possession of educational credentials or technical expertise; and all of these guarantee greater influence than that furnished by simple labour-power. It is essentially this inequality of effectiveness that engenders the specific relations between classes. Power assets can be combined, and the social position of some classes is defined

precisely by their combinations. This is typically the case of the self-employed workers owning very small firms and frequently labelled the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ (shopkeepers, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, stock-breeders, vine-dressers, and the like). Indeed, they possess their own means of production, have specific technical expertise, and directly contribute with their own labour to the operation of their small firms. A similar case can be made for self-employed professionals (lawyers, financial consultants, architects, medical doctors). Their class position is based on the possession of both high educational credentials and means of production. Obviously, numerous people are equipped with high educational credentials or technical skills and everybody is endowed with his/her own labour. But in many cases these assets are intangible and can be ignored. The class positions of entrepreneurs and chief executives entirely depend on their control of means of production. Indeed, an entrepreneur remains an entrepreneur even though s/he may be in poor health and does not possess any educational qualification.

As in the case of socio-occupational stratification scales, social scientists have developed several definitions of classes and numerous class schemes. However, those linked to the Marxist and Weberian traditions are still the most influential.

Neo-Marxist scholars maintain that classes are rooted in the social relations of production and the related processes of exploitation. However, they acknowledge that the social stratification of advanced societies is much more complex than envisaged by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century. They state that, besides the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, there are classes whose members are simultaneously exploited by the owners of means of production and are exploiters of the working class. These middle classes are distinguished according to the amount of educational and professional credentials possessed by their members and the control that they can exert over the organisational arrangements of firms and public bureaucracies. Moreover, neo-Marxists authors maintain that the owners of means of production do not form an entirely homogeneous class, and they split them among the bourgeoisie (i.e. entrepreneurs and chief executive officers of large and

medium-sized firms), small entrepreneurs (owners of firms with a small number of employees), and the petty bourgeoisie (i.e. the self-employed with one or two employees at most).

Authors who adopt the neo-Weberian perspective draw up their class schemes by considering both the work and the market situation of individuals and groups. In their opinion, the process of class formation does not revolve solely around the social division of labour; it also revolves around the economic life chances of individuals and groups. In their more recent developments, neo-Weberian representations of class structure first separate employers from the self-employed and employees and then grouped employers into three classes: large employers, small employers not in agriculture, small employers in agriculture. The same sectoral distinction is performed for the self-employed. Finally, employees are allocated to different classes mainly according to the employment relations between them and their employers. Two main dimensions underlie the forms of employment contracts usually available in the labour markets of advanced societies: the (high or low) specificity of the human assets possessed by employees, i.e. their level and kind of technical and social abilities, and the (high or low) difficulty of monitoring their work by employers. The combination of these two dimensions produces three basic types of contract: a) service relationship; b) labour contract; c) mixed forms of service relation and labour contract. These contractual categories are then internally subdivided according to the organisational roles usually performed by the relevant employees and/or the economic sector (industry and services *vs.* agriculture) in which they work.

Recent developments

In recent years, the two standard approaches to the study of social stratification have progressively converged, and currently several lines of empirical inquiry on social inequalities are carried out using class schemes or socio-occupational scales indifferently. This convergence has been produced by the increasingly detailed information about interviewees' occupations collected by socio-

economic surveys, the progress achieved in the statistical techniques used for the relevant analyses, and the conviction that both ways to express social positions of individuals and groups can be useful in clarifying the effects of these positions on specific inequalities and the mechanisms underlying them.

The convergence of the class and stratum perspectives has not increased their popularity among social scientists, however. On the contrary, both have been challenged by authors who maintain that strata and classes are disappearing, or have already disappeared, from the contemporary advanced societies. In the opinion of such authors, social inequalities are becoming increasingly fragmented on an individual basis. Two main arguments are put forward to support this thesis. First, advanced societies have undergone a long process of institutionalisation of individualism: that is to say, a process which places personal rights and personal independence at the centre of cultural, political, economic, and juridical arrangements. As a consequence, collective entities, such as professional associations, local communities, classes, strata, churches, and even families are increasingly less able to shape the life trajectories and destinations of individuals. Second, the globalisation of the economy exposes everybody, no matter how privileged in their current social positions, to increasing risks of suddenly lapsing into unemployment, financial hardship, poverty, multiple deprivation, and similar distressful situations.

Social stratification scholars react to the thesis of the individualisation of social inequalities by maintaining that it has not yet received convincing empirical support. These scholars admit that the advanced societies are experiencing a secular trend towards emancipation of individuals from the strict social control exerted in the past by different communities. But they also point out that a large body of empirical analysis has shown that several different expressions of crucial inequalities – such as those regarding educational opportunities, intergenerational mobility and career chances, risks of unemployment, level of income and wealth, health conditions – and even the mating selection process are still linked to the class and stratum of origin and current belonging. Authors supporting the thesis of the crystallisation of inequalities around classes and strata recognise that the

latter are less socially visible than they were at the beginning of the industrialisation process. Moreover, they acknowledge that the contemporary advanced societies are becoming somewhat more socially fluid and open. But they stress that this movement towards greater social fairness is feeble and slow, so that most of these societies still exhibit highly effective processes of social closure structured around strata and classes.

Indeed, as shown by the experience of the Nordic countries, only systematic and long-lasting policies aimed at increasing levels of social equality can guarantee a stable reduction of social disparities. In the past ten years, however these policies have been weakened everywhere by both the increasing popularity of market-oriented economic thought and the more recent negative effects of economic recession.

Further readings

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