CHAPTER 12
STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL CLASS

CHAPTER COMMENTARY

This chapter has some strong links to the policy-related material on poverty and welfare in chapters 13 and 14. Many teachers may still choose to tie these together within individual sessions. Since a session on social inequality can easily drift into a discussion about anything under the sun, but in teaching terms it is particularly useful to have limited topics with clear objectives.

The chapter opens with an account of the way the metaphor of social stratification is used to enlighten us about relationships between individuals and groups within a wider society. The accent is on structured inequalities between groups. Having highlighted the aptness of such a geological metaphor, the text moves on to discuss four basic types of stratification – slavery, caste, estates and social class. The first three are defined briefly and set in their historical contexts. The main concern here, though, is with social class.

Slavery is marked by the existence of ownership of individuals, though the exact laws regulating it have varied considerably. In modern times slavery has been tied to physical labour but in the ancient world many slaves were skilled trades people or administrators. The caste system is logically tied to the Hindu belief in reincarnation, the caste system representing a ladder down which one may slip in the next life if not virtuous in this. Estates have existed from traditional states through to the end of feudalism. In Europe the three estates were the nobility, the clergy and then the commoners. The Third Estate was an important element in the French Revolution. Unlike castes, estates are permeable through intermarriage or the granting or purchase of titles.

A social class is defined as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that in turn influence their lifestyle. Class stands apart from these other systems of stratification. Four main distinctions can be drawn:

1. Classes are not dependent on legal or religious decrees and are thus (formally at least) more fluid.
2. Class is in part achieved rather than ascribed. Some mobility between groupings can and does occur.
3. Classes are dependent on economic differentials between groups, usually either ownership of or access to material resources.
4. Class systems are more impersonal than other forms of stratification. Inequalities operate at a macro-level across occupational categories; other forms of stratification operate at the level of personal relationships, involving duties and privileges.

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Having set class in the context of other types of stratification, the text moves on to consider some theories of stratification. The discussion begins with a familiar paradox – Marx is best known for his writings on classes and class conflict and indeed, is presented here as a Classic Study - yet he never provided a clear and consistent conceptual treatment of class. The main positions associated with Marx are then rehearsed. The Marxian definition of class depends on relationship to the means of production. In pre-modern times this meant land and farming tools, and the classes were landowner and land labourer. In modern societies the means of production are machinery and factory or office space, but the classes are still owners and non-owners (capitalists and workers). Crucial to class theory is the notion of exploitation. In feudal societies this often involved the expropriation of produce from peasant to landlord. In modern societies, Marx argued, the expropriation is less visible but still there in the form of surplus value or, as capitalists call it, profit. One side’s surplus value is the other’s necessary profit margin. The continuity in Marx’s theory is inequality, but he emphasizes the increase in this in modern times, despite the enormous increase in wealth made possible by technological advance. The increasing relative impoverishment of the factory class would result in pauperization at some time in the future. To add insult to injury, of course, Marx felt that even the nature of work itself ceases to offer compensation as it becomes routine and alienating.

Weber is seen as building on Marx’s approach but with modifications. Weber’s emphasis is on a complex multidimensional system of stratification rather than one that is polarized. In particular he differs on two points:

1. Objective economic conditions involve access not just to the means of production, but also to resources like paper credentials or craft skills that bestow a degree of market power.
2. Class is supplemented by the concepts of status and party.

Weber’s idea of status is akin to honour or prestige. He points out that in traditional societies this was earned face to face, but as social organization became increasingly complex people used markers, that is to say their styles of life, to express their status. Crucially, Weber sees this as being able to exist independently of class. Wealth and status often accompany one another, but high-status characteristics such as breeding, family connections, accent or taste can outweigh the amount of purchasing power. The central distinction again is that class is objectively observable, and status is determined by subjective evaluation; class is economic and status derives from lifestyle.

In addition to status, Weber uses the term ‘party’ to refer to affiliations that crosscut economic class, key examples being nationalism and religion. Weberian ideas are presented as more wide-ranging and therefore as more sophisticated than those of Marx. Most contemporary theorists combine elements from both. Erik Olin Wright identifies three types of economic resources over which one can exercise control:

1. investments of money capital
2. physical means of production
3. labour power

Capitalists control all three, the working classes none, but intermediate groups may control one or more of these. They are in contradictory class locations. Although a huge proportion of the population is forced to sell its labour, as high as 90 per cent, there is huge diversity
among this group, so Wright uses factors like skills and expertise as well as relationships with authority to further distinguish between these groups.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, sociological studies of inequality shifted away from an almost exclusive focus on social class to explore other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. One influential attempt to connect different forms of inequality has been via the concept of intersectionality – the complex interweaving of diverse social inequalities which shapes individual lives and complicates the earlier, comparatively simple class analysis.

There follows a discussion of the measurement issues involved in class analysis. It is noted that class has to be operationalized in some way in order to be observed and measured. Occupation has of course been primary among these methods. The distinction is made between descriptive and relational class schemes, with Erik Olin Wright’s ‘class map’ being an example of the latter. Some attention is given to the neo-Weberian scheme known commonly as the Goldthorpe classification. In the latter, market situation and work situation (more recently ‘employment relations’) are crucial in evaluating the place of an occupation within the scheme. Some limitations of occupational classifications are rehearsed, although their remarkable predictive power is acknowledged. Areas that remain inaccessible to this form of measurement are economic inactivity and the ownership of property and wealth. While Goldthorpe regards the super-rich as so few in number as to be of residual importance, Westergaard highlights their disproportionate socio-structural weight acquired through sheer concentration of wealth.

This debate is then used to set up an empirical examination of class in the contemporary West. There is an extended treatment of the upper class and their ownership of high concentrations of different forms of economic capital. The super-rich are treated as a shifting homogenous grouping and it is acknowledged that there are numerous routes into the club. John Scott’s argument about the constellation of interests that benefits from big business is deployed at this point. The middle class is a much broader category, but one held together by the common factor of either educational credentials or technical qualifications. Some more detailed analysis of the notion of credentials is undertaken, along with the introduction of the ‘managerial-professional class’ as a concept. Professionalism relies on three techniques to ensure its success: controls on entry, regulation of conduct and, in the case of medicine, total exclusivity in terms of the right to practise.

Within the working class the rising level of consumerism is noted and the concept of embourgeoisement is revisited in the context of the Affluent Worker study of the 1960s. The text alerts us to the existence of the term ‘underclass’ to describe a cut-off stratum characterized by multiple disadvantage. The idea goes back to Marx’s lumpenproletariat but has its recent significance in the work of William Julius Wilson and Charles Murray. Both men agree that racial discrimination is not directly to blame; Murray however recycles the culture of poverty thesis while Wilson examines the economic mechanisms constraining the ghetto poor.

Away from the USA, European cities also have racially concentrated neighbourhoods where poverty is high – Turks in Germany, Algerians in France, Albanians in Italy – and immigration becomes part of the policy equation. The UK context is introduced in terms of empirical work (by Gallie and by Morris) that shows the persistence of working-class values among those even in long-term unemployment.
Having covered the main classes, the chapter now discusses two challenges to more conventional views of class. First, the text discusses the way that it is now customary to take as much notice of consumption markers as those of production or market position. Identities stem as much from lifestyle choices as from employment. To help bring class and consumption together, we are introduced to Bourdieu’s use of forms of capital to explain differences between groups on the basis of taste and consumption. The concluding point is that consumption may crosscut or reinforce class boundaries.

The next section, ‘Gender and stratification’, offers an assessment of the ways in which gender causes difficulty for class analysis. The conventional position, which allotted married or cohabiting women to the class of their husband, is critiqued in four ways:

(a) in dual earner households women’s income can be essential for maintaining the economic position of the household;
(b) a wife’s occupation may ‘set the standard’ of the family’s status, e.g. a female shopkeeper who earns less than a male semi-skilled worker;
(c) in cross-class households it may be more realistic to put partners in separate categories;
(d) there are an increasing number of households with women as the sole breadwinner.

Social mobility is the next major area tackled. This section considers movement both up and down the occupational scale and includes a number of important terms, namely vertical mobility, lateral mobility, intragenerational mobility and intergenerational mobility. Comparative mobility studies are cited in order to distinguish between short- and long-range mobility and raise questions of methodology. In particular, the Marshall and Firth study is used as a novel example of using both subjective and objective dimensions of mobility. The text gives some attention to downward mobility and its recent increase, associating it with redundancy and the female experience of relationship break-up. Access to top positions remains limited by shortage of supply and the inherited advantage of existing elites. A brief survey of some studies of social mobility reveals that much upward mobility is explained by upgrading of occupations rather than movement between occupations, and also that women are severely disadvantaged in the race for mobility.

The chapter closes with an argument in favour of retaining class at the core of analyses of economic inequality, not least because of its continuing correlation with a whole range of different dimensions of inequality. It tries to reconcile the fact of increasing class inequality in the last twenty years with continuing opportunities for mobility through expanded qualifications and new economic opportunities. The trend, it argues, is towards greater fluidity and meritocracy.

**TEACHING TOPICS**

1. **Approaches to stratification**
   Covering the sections ‘Theorizing social class’ and ‘Measuring class’, this topic aims to identify key concepts and establish a firm grasp of the main theoretical perspectives on the subject.

2. **Contemporary patterns of social inequality**
This pulls together sections on different classes and on gender. It aims to address the value of each within the broader framework of class analysis in the contemporary West.

3. Studying social mobility
This is an important opportunity for tutors to emphasize the dynamic aspects of class position against the often-accepted view that people’s class locations are ‘one-offs’. Importantly it addresses both upward and downward mobility.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Approaches to stratification

A. Read the section ‘Theorizing social class’ on pages 485-91 and from this try to construct a concise general definition of class, and establish the main ways in which it is distinct from status.

B. Make an initial attempt to locate yourself within a class or status grouping. This can be quite general for now, but as you do this think about the criteria on which you base your answer. Is it your income, or relationship to the means of production, or perhaps that of your parents? Of Marx, Weber or Olin Wright, whose ideas do you find the most meaningful to you?

C. Try ‘class-spotting’ in a number of social situations, such as a doctor’s surgery, a supermarket or perhaps from watching TV shows. In each case justify your decision to label people as upper, middle, or working class.

Activity 2: Contemporary patterns of social inequality

A. Read pages 496-507 of the text. Have a detailed look at table 12.2. Then make notes on the following issues:

1. Assess the evidence for the existence of an ‘upper class’. In addition to the reading specified, try looking up the members of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet in *Who’s Who* and see where they were educated.

2. Think about your own situation in relation to recent changes in the class structure. You may have left a home-owning household and now be in the private rented sector. In each of these cases, decide whether you think this has made a substantial difference to (a) the status others accord you, and (b) your own views about social and political issues.

3. From your reading, make some assessment of the degree of material inequality that exists in the UK today. While you are doing this, think about whether an unequal society is necessarily a class society, and consider the main criteria on which you base your judgement. Hold a debate on whether the UK is a classless society, but try to reach agreement on the consistent use of terminology and recourse to empirical evidence.

Activity 3: Studying social mobility

A. Either individually or in small groups, research the family background and life histories of a number of people. In the process of completing this exercise, consider (a) the factors which influence an individual’s access to material resources over the life course, and (b) the relationship between the place of individuals and households in class analysis. See whether
you find any evidence of intra- or intergenerational mobility in your case studies, and if so try to identify common factors that facilitate such change.

B. Produce a past, present and future profile of your class position and aspirations. Include your family background, your parents’ occupations, then consider your current position in terms of purchasing power and ownership of assets. Try to be realistic about what you hope to earn and your likely choice of career. In addition, evaluate your position by, for instance, writing down the level of income that (a) you expect to earn and (b) you would regard as ‘comfortable’ or ‘affluent’. Based on this self-assessment, are you upwardly mobile, downwardly mobile or static? How do your self-assessment and expectations compare with others in the group?

C. Consider carefully how the exercises you have been doing relate to the theme of ‘the social and the personal’. How far do they also involve ‘thinking oneself away’ from commonsense notions about class?

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Approaches to stratification
Who is better off, a middle-class housewife or an unemployed man? How would such a comparison illuminate the relationship between class and status?
Which of the theoretical approaches to stratification seems most relevant to your own experience?
What are the main advantages of the Goldthorpe class scheme over other ‘descriptive’ schemes?

Contemporary patterns of social inequality
Why do you think modern societies are so much more unequal than their forerunners?
How many classes are there in contemporary British society? How can they be distinguished from one another?
Would you say your life is more determined by your class or your gender?

Studying social mobility
Given that the potential for social mobility exists, why is it not more common?
How would we measure whether one society was more ‘open’ than another in terms of its mobility?
What factors are operating both for and against your own chances of upward social mobility?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Critically assess the main strengths and weaknesses of Marxian and Weberian approaches to social stratification.

2. It has been suggested that class is sociology’s ‘only independent variable’. Explain and evaluate this claim.

3. How different would class analysis be if it fully incorporated gender?
4. What do sociologists mean when they write of ‘the death of class’? Are they right?

**MAKING CONNECTIONS**

**Approaches to stratification**
Stratification has potential connections with most of the book. Specifically, theories of stratification connect with the discussion of Marx and Weber in Chapter 1, the concept of occupation in Chapter 7 and the discussion of individual socialization in Chapter 9.

**Contemporary patterns of social inequality**
The concern here is with empirical evidence on the fortunes of class groupings and their relationship to other social groupings. To this extent the most fruitful links are to be drawn with the discussion of gender in Chapter 15, the experience of ethnic groups in Chapter 16 and changing labour market patterns in Chapter 7.

**Studying social mobility**
The activities for this topic encourage the student to locate themselves on class trajectories and to reflect on the reasons for movement on the class scale. Interesting connections would be with the relationship between class and marriage (Chapter 10) or with any of the material on identity from elsewhere in the book.
SAMPLE SESSION

Studying social mobility

Aims: To introduce the debates around the concept of social mobility and to promote critical reflection of students’ positions as potentially socially mobile actors.

Outcome: By the end of the session students will be able to:

1. Define and distinguish between the terms ‘vertical’, ‘lateral’, ‘inter’- and ‘intra-generational mobility’.
2. Produce a longitudinal profile of their own class position and likely prospects. Understand the factors which influence patterns of social mobility.

Preparatory tasks
Read the relevant sections of Sociology. In small groups carry out Task A and prepare a summary of the key points.

Classroom tasks
1. Tutor elicits from the class definitions of the four types of mobility mentioned in the text. Definitions go up on a board/flip chart and remain there for duration of lesson. (10 minutes)
2. Split the class into the groups in which they did preparatory task. Groups now present key points from mobility case studies, stressing the causal factors involved. (15 minutes)
3. As individuals, students complete Task B. (10 minutes)
4. Tutor-led discussion based on selected ‘mobility profiles’. (15 minutes)
5. Tutor rounds off with links back to definitions in task 1. (5 minutes)

Assessment task
On the basis of your individual ‘mobility profile’, discuss the variables which impact on the life-chances of social actors.