

# **From a sociological perspective critically evaluate the concepts of stratification and class together with the relationship of class to inequality of outcomes for members of society.**

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## **Introduction**

In this essay I will attempt to briefly outline the concepts and types of stratification, evaluate various theories of stratification within class based societies, explain the difficulties inherent in relating class to inequality of outcomes, and ultimately give examples of these inequalities, specifically in the areas of both health and educational outcomes.

## **Social Stratification**

Stratification describes the division of a society into unequal sections or strata; each with varying degrees of power over financial and material resources, and each other. This power is attributed differently depending on the system of stratification. All known human societies above the subsistence hunter-gatherer level are socially stratified into one of four systems.

Slavery, as a system of stratification, is one in which slaves constitute the principle work force. Once extremely common (existing in societies as different as those of classical Greece and Rome, and post colonial America) slavery was eventually abolished in the western world (and its almost global sphere of influence) in the late 19th Century. However with the collapse of empire and the proliferation of war and extreme poverty in Africa, slavery has remerged as a mode of production. According to Amnesty international, over 90,000 slaves are estimated to exist today in the East African nation of Mauritania alone.

In 'Hindu History - A search for our present in history', Sudheer Birokar describes how the caste system emerged in Ancient India, when the Brahmin priest caste utilised the idea of reincarnation and of karma (a classic Marxist 'legitimizing ideology') to perpetuate their domination of the Vaishya cultivator and Shudra servant castes. Even in modern India, Hindus who fulfil their caste roles in this life believe they will attain a higher caste in the next. Intermarriage with the lowest untouchable caste, who still carry out the jobs seen as unclean, is forbidden to those of higher caste, on threat of loss of caste status.

Estate systems such as medieval European feudalism are, like the caste system, characterised by relationships between social strata based on rights and obligations. However they differ in the absence of a belief in reincarnation, replaced by a legitimising relationship between religious and ruling strata. The British monarchy are a remnant of the European feudal estate system, embedded within a modern democratic

capitalist class system, they retain many its characteristic elements, such as an oath of allegiance and a legitimising relationship with the dominant religious institution.

### **Class based Societies**

The dominant contemporary system of social stratification is the class system; which differs from all other systems of stratification in the absence of formal restrictions on intermarriage, and the movement of individuals between classes. Social mobility for all is at least theoretically possible. The inequalities prevalent in a class system are less defined by duty or subjugation than pay, education, working environment, life-chances etc.

Thus people are stratified within a class system on primarily economic grounds. A number of theories exist to explain the structure of class-based societies, and to define an individual's class location.

Karl Marx's concept of class, perhaps the most influential, defines a class as a group with a common relationship to the means of production (capital, labour and property). Thus in a Marxist analysis there are two essential strata within society. A capitalist class, who possess the money and property, enabling them to exploit a dispossessed class of workers.

Marx saw this division as existing within all systems of stratification, and manifesting itself in the class system through the transfer of the surplus value of the output of the working class (the excess produced over that required to pay salaries, business running costs etc) to the capitalist.

As a solution to this exploitative situation he proposed the 10 steps of the communist manifesto; including the abolition of private property, the centralisation of credit and production in the hands of the state, and the redistribution of wealth through progressive income tax.

However Marx's theories fail to explain many of the divisions (such as ethnicity, religion, gender, and political groupings) within society; nor their power, influence and effect on the social strata of their members. Max Weber attempted to account for these discrepancies by introducing the determinants of status (social honour attained by respect or the display of wealth) and party (a group who work together to forward common interests), to social stratification.

Erik Olin Wright, proposed that a variety of contradictory class locations were inhabited by groups having more control over the means of production than the working class, but less than the capitalist. Control achieved through higher skills and experience, and hence greater marketability. Granting them more power in the workplace and a better relationship with authority.

Wright's explanation does seem to most accurately reflect the position of workers in the modern liberalised economies of Britain and America; where a growing proportion are employed in insecure circumstances with widely varying pay and conditions, due to the growth in contractual forms of employment and the reduction in union (and hence employee) power, as labour is treated more and more as just another factor of production (Hutton, 1996, P. 89-110).

### **Assessing the relationship of class to inequality of outcomes**

The relationship of class to inequality of opportunity and outcome is hard to assess due to the difficulty of attributing specific class locations to the varying circumstances of individuals, and the difficulty of obtaining unbiased data relating class to unemployment, educational outcomes and health conditions. In addition, the rapidly changing nature of modern class structure, together with increasing living standards makes comparing current data with historic statistics problematic.

Never the less several schemes have been developed to operationalize class (eg: Goldthorpe scheme) - through occupational status; and others to assess levels of deprivation (eg: Townsend deprivation index), in order to relate concrete figures such as mortality rates to operationalized class statistics.

Inequality of outcomes created by class difference can take two forms, those directly related to unequal opportunities, for example the greater likelihood of attaining a university place when applying from a private secondary school, and those deriving from the culture, living conditions, and situation of the class itself, such as the higher incidence of heart disease in working class individuals.

### **Health Outcomes relating to Social Inequalities**

Studies such as the Black report (1980) have demonstrated a (widening) relationship between the occupation (and hence class) of individuals and the age at which they are likely to die. For example, in 1970 unskilled British workers were 61% more likely than professionals to die prematurely. (Montague, 1998).

Whitehall I and II, surveys of morbidity and mortality in civil servants in the UK, have discovered (even within this relatively privileged, and homogenous group) the occurrence of almost all forms of serious illness, and the age at which individuals tend to die are directly related to grade (rank) within the civil service. One of the leading researchers involved in the Study, Sir Michael Marmot, has related this gap in health outcomes to the degrees of control, integration, and work fulfilment individuals experience relative to their position in the hierarchy (Kreiser, 2002) This research, together with other studies relating income inequality to mortality (e.g.: Kaplan et al, 1996 - Quoted in Montague 1998) and studies of the capability of primates to deal with induced stress (Sapolsky & Share, 1994) has provided ample evidence to support the hypothesis that (above the level of absolute deprivation) it is the degree to which a society or social group is unequally stratified, rather than the absolute wealth of its members which dictates the morbidity and lifespan an individual of lower status is likely to experience.

### **Educational Outcomes relating to Social Inequalities**

The influence of class of origin is not however confined to health outcomes. Educational achievement also is highly class related. A comparison of 1986 levels of university attendance indicates that the children of the least advantaged groups within

Irish society (comprising skilled and unskilled manual workers, and similarly stratified occupations) held 14.8% of University places, compared to the 69.1% of places taken by the progeny of more advantaged groups (such as lower professionals, employers and managers). A number of explanations have been advanced to account for this disparity, from functionalist suggestions that lower socio-economic groups tend to be stocked with individuals of lower intelligence and general aptitude (i.e.: that the less successful are inherently less able, and tend to have children who are in turn less able) to neo-weberian analysis, emphasising the life chances, expectations, and attitudes of working class families. (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, P. 143, 149)

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately the degree to which one emphasises the importance of personal ambition, effort and innate ability over factors such as class of origin, unequal opportunities and formal and informal barriers to class entry, in determining social class, is a matter of personal politics. However the inequalities of outcome resulting from class location are undeniable. As is the increasingly well-documented relationship between the degree of inequality in the wealth of a society, and the health of those at the bottom. What remains to establish is which kind of a society we choose to perpetuate. A supposedly meritocratic oligarchy, in which the poor are left to their disadvantages, and even blamed for them; or a more fair and egalitarian society, where inequality of achievement results not in social exclusion and condemnation of the individual, but analysis and reform of the social system.

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