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SOCIAL CLASSES AND CLASS CONFLICT IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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I. The Marxian View as a Point of Departure

Nineteen hundred and forty-eight is the centenary of the Communist Manifesto—the first major theoretical statement of Marxism—and some stocktaking of where Marx and Engels stood in an important line of the development of social science rather than only as the ideological founders of "scientific socialism" is in order.

The president of the American Economic Association, Professor Schumpeter, has particularly clearly distinguished these two aspects of Marx's work. He has also within the scientific component distinguished Marx, the economic theorist, from Marx, the sociologist. In both respects I should like to follow Professor Schumpeter.

From my point of view, looking toward the development of modern sociological theory, Marx represented a first major step beyond the point at which the Utilitarian theorists, who set the frame of reference within which the classical economics developed, stood. Marx introduced no fundamental modification of the general theory of human social behavior in the terms which this school of thought represented. He did, however, unlike the Utilitarians, see and emphasize the massive fact of the structuring of interests rather than treating them as distributed at random. The structure of the productive forces which Marx outlined it for capitalist society is real and of fundamental importance. Naturally, many refinements in the presentation of the structural facts and their historical development have been introduced since Marx's day, but the fundamental fact is certainly correct. The theory of class conflict is an integral part of this. It is of great interest to sociology.

Marx, however, tended to treat the socioeconomic structure of capitalist enterprise as a single indivisible entity rather than breaking it down analytically into a set of the distinct variables involved in it. It is this analytical breakdown which is for present purposes the most distinctive feature of modern sociological analysis, and which must be done to take advantage of advances that have taken place. It results both in a modification of the Marxian view of the system itself and enables the establishment of relations to other aspects of the total social system, aspects of which Marx was unaware. This change results

1 J. A. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy.
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in an important modification of Marx's empirical perspective in relation
to the class problem as in other contexts. The primary structural em-
phasis no longer falls on the orientation of capitalistic enterprise
to profit and the theory of exploitation but rather on the structure
of occupational roles within the system of industrial society.

Thus class conflict and its structural bases are seen in a somewhat
different perspective. Conflict does not have the same order of in-
evitality, but is led back to the interrelations of a series of more
particular factors, the combinations of which may vary. Exactly how
serious the element of conflict is becomes a matter of empirical inves-
tigation. Similarly, the Marxian utopianism about the classlessness of
communist society is brought into serious question. There is a sense
in which the Marxian view of the inevitability of class conflict is the
obverse of the utopian factor in Marxian thought.

It should, however, be clearly noted how important Marx was in
the development of modern sociological thought. All three of the writers
who may be regarded as its most important theoretical founders—
Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber—were profoundly
concerned with the problems raised by Marx. Each of them took the
Marxian view with great seriousness as compared with its Utilitarian
background, but none of them ended up as a Marxian. Each pushed
on to a further development in a distinctive direction which in spite
of the diversity of their backgrounds contains a striking common
element.²

II. The Approach to the Analysis of Social Stratification in Terms
of Modern Sociological Theory

On the basis of modern sociological approach, it may perhaps be
said that Marx looked at the structure of capitalistic enterprise and
generalized a social system from it, including the class structure and,
to him, the inevitable conflicts involved in it. Conversely, the concept
of the generalized social system is the basis of modern sociological
thinking. Analyzed in this framework, both capitalistic enterprise
and social stratification are seen in the context of their role in such a
social system. The organization of production and social stratification
are, of course, both variable in these terms, though also functionally
related to each other. For the functional basis of the phenomena of
stratification, it is necessary to analyze the problem of integrating
and ordering social relationships within a social system. Some set of
norms governing relations of superiority and inferiority is an inherent
need of every stable social system. There will be immense variation,

²Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action.
but this is a constant point of reference. Such a patterning or ordering is the stratification system of the society.

As with all other major structural elements of the social system, the norms governing its stratification tend to become institutionalized; that is, moral sentiments crystallize about them and the whole system of motivational elements (including both disinterested and self-interested components) tends to be structured in support of conformity to them. There is a system of sanctions, both formal and informal, in support; so that deviant tendencies are met with varying degrees and kinds of disapproval, withdrawal of co-operation, and positive infliction of punishment. Conversely, there are rewards for conformity and institutionalized achievements.³

It follows that in relation to the problem of social class as in other fields, the general problem of economic motivation must be viewed in an institutional context. Even the system of profit seeking of modern capitalism is, there is abundant evidence, an institutionalized system. To be sure, it grew up as a result of emancipation from previous institutional controls in a pre-capitalistic order, but it could not have become established and stabilized to the extent that actually happened had it not had a positive system of moral sentiments underlying it and had it not acquired an institutional status of its own. The Marxian interpretation of this problem tends to see the structuring and control of self-interest only in terms of the realistic situation in which people are placed. Modern sociological theory accedes fully to the importance of this aspect, but insists that it must be seen in combination with a structure of institutionalized moral sentiments as well, so that conformity is determined by a system of mutually reinforcing situational pressures and subjective motivational elements, which in one sense are obverse aspects of the same process.

III. The Fundamentals of Stratification in a Modern Industrialized Social System

The distinctive feature of this structure called “social stratification” is that it ranks individuals in the general social hierarchy in generalized terms, not in any one specific context. For the sake of simplicity, we may first speak specifically of the importance of two such contexts in a modern industrial society and then of the articulations between them.

Looked at in the large, by far the most prominent structure of modern Western society is that organized around the “work” people

³See Talcott Parsons, Essays in Sociological Theory, for a variety of different discussions of the problem of institutionalization and its relation to motivation on the psychological level.
do, whether this work is in the field of economic enterprise, of governmental function, or of various other types of private nonprofit activity, such as that of our own academic profession. The extremely elaborate division of labor, which permits a tremendous specialization of functions of this sort, of course necessitates an equally elaborate system of exchange, where the products of the work of specialized groups (whether they be material or immaterial) are made available to those who can utilize them, and vice versa, the specialist is enabled to live without performing innumerable functions for himself, because he has access to the results of the work of innumerable others. Similarly, there must be a property system which regulates claims to transferable entities, material or immaterial, and thereby secures rights in means of life and in the facilities which are necessary for the performance of function. The whole complex of structural elements in our society may be called "the instrumental complex." Its three fundamental elements—occupation, exchange, and property—are all inextricably interdependent.

On a high level of the structural differentiation of a social system, the occupational system seems to be the least variable of the three and thus in a certain sense structurally the most fundamental. Elaboration of the system of exchange and its segregation from functionally irrelevant contexts are certainly essential. But there may be great variation in the extent to which the units in the exchange process enjoy autonomy in their decisions and are thus free to be oriented to their own "profit" or act merely as agents of a more comprehensive organization. Similarly, though presumably something like the Roman-modern institution of ownership is called for, the organization units in which such rights inhere may also vary, and with them the line between property and contractual rights.

Within such ranges of variation, a highly developed system of occupational roles, with functional considerations dominating them, will tend to have certain relatively constant features. Perhaps the most important of these features, seen in comparative perspective, is its inherently "individualistic" character. That is, the status of the individual must be determined on grounds essentially peculiar to himself, notably his own personal qualities, technical competence, and his own decisions about his occupational career and with respect to which he is not identified with any solidary group.

This is, of course, not in the least to suggest that he has complete freedom; he is subject to all manner of pressures, many of which are from various points of view "irrational." It is nevertheless fundamental that status and role allocation and the processes of mobility from status to status are in terms of the individual as a unit and not of
solidary groups, like kinship groups, castes, village communities, etc.

There is, furthermore, an inherent hierarchical aspect to such a system. There are two fundamental functional bases of the hierarchical aspect. One is the differentiation of levels of skill and competence involved in the many different functional roles. The requirement of rare abilities on the one hand and of competence which can only be acquired by prolonged and difficult training on the other make such differentiation inherent. Secondly, organization on an ever increasing scale is a fundamental feature of such a system. Such organization naturally involves centralization and differentiation of leadership and authority; so that those who take responsibility for co-ordinating the actions of many others must have a different status in important respects from those who are essentially in the role of carrying out specifications laid down by others. From a sociological point of view, one of the fundamental problems in such a system is the way in which these basic underlying differentiations get structured into institutionalized status differentiations.

The second major context of an industrialized social system which is relevant to its stratification is that of kinship. The fundamental principle of kinship relationships is that of the solidarity of the members of the kinship unit which precludes individualistic differentiation of fortune and status in the sense in which this is fundamental to the occupational system. In other societies, extended kinship units are very prominent indeed. In our society, the size of the unit has been reduced to a relative minimum—the conjugal family of parents and immature children. Only on this basis is it compatible with our occupational system at all. Nevertheless, this minimum is fundamental to our social system and differentiations of status, except those involved in age and sex roles, cannot be tolerated within it. The same individual who has a role in the occupational system is also a member of the family unit. In the latter context, his status must be shared within broad limits by the others, irrespective of their personal competence, qualities, and deserts. The articulation of the two is possible only by virtue of the fact that in the type case only one member of a family unit, the husband or father, is in the fullest sense normally a functioning member of the occupational system. Important though this degree of segregation of the two is, for it to be complete would be functionally impossible.

Wives, by virtue of at least different qualities and achievements than those of their husbands, must in the relevant contexts share their status. This means that criteria and symbols of status relevant to the family must be extended to realms outside the sphere of the same order of functionally utilitarian considerations on which a woman’s husband’s
status in his occupation is based. The style of life of a family and its implication in the realm of feminine activities, however dependent it may be on a husband’s income, precludes that total status should be a simple function of the “shop” concerns of a man’s occupational world. Equally important, children must share the status of their parents if there is to be a family system at all. If the status of the parents is hierarchically differentiated, there will inevitably be an element of differential access to opportunity.

It is only in terms of the articulation of these two fundamentals, the instrumental complex and kinship, that I should speak of social class in a sociological sense. A class may then be defined as a plurality of kinship units which, in those respects where status in a hierarchical context is shared by their members, have approximately common status. The class status of an individual, therefore, is that which he shares with the other members in an effective kinship unit. We have a class system, therefore, only insofar as the differentiations inherent in our occupational structure, with its differential relations to the exchange system and to property, remuneration, etc., has become ramified out into a system of strata, which involve differentiations of family living based partly on income, standard of life and style of life, and, of course, differential access for the younger generation to opportunity as well as differential pressures to which they are subject. There is no doubt that everywhere that modern industrial society has existed there has been a class system in this sense. There are, however, considerable variations from one society to another, particularly between the European versions of industrial capitalism and the American.

In certain respects, the above considerations might be regarded as obvious. It has been necessary to enter into them, however, because of their bearing on the perspective in which the modern class system is seen. “Liberal” economic thought has for understandable reasons paid primary attention to the market system and therefore views the economy as a system of market-oriented units rather than concerning itself with occupational structure, most of which is internal to such units. Marxian thought shares this emphasis with the addition of the capitalist-labor division in its bearing on the market process. Neither has had much concern for the family. The importance of the difference of perspective will become evident in the analysis of class conflict which follows.

IV. The Analysis of Class Conflict in Sociological Terms

The above sociological analysis of social stratification is based heavily on the general view that stratification is to an important degree an integrating structure in the social system. The ordering of
relationships in this context is necessary to stability. This is necessary precisely because of the importance of potential though often latent conflicts. Therefore, the problem of class conflict may be approached in terms of an analysis of these latent conflicts and of the ways in which the institutional integration of the system does and does not succeed in developing adequate control mechanisms. The following principal aspects of the tendency to develop class conflict in our type of social system may be mentioned.

1. There is an inherently competitive aspect of our individualistic occupational system. Because it is differentiated on a prestige scale and because there is individual choice of occupation and a measure of equality of opportunity, there will inevitably be some differentiation into winners and losers. Certain psychological consequences of such situations are known. There will be certain tendencies to arrogance on the part of some winners and to resentment and to a "sour grapes" attitude on the part of some losers. The extent to which the system is institutionalized in terms of genuine standards of fair competition is the critical problem.

2. The role of organization means that there must be an important part played by discipline and authority. Discipline and authority do not exist on a grand scale without generating some resistance. Some form, therefore, of structuring in terms of an opposition of sentiments and interests between those in authority and those subject to it is endemic in such a system. The whole problem of the institutionalization of authority so as to insure its adequate acceptance where necessary and protect against its abuse is difficult—doubly so in such a complex system.

3. There does seem to be a general tendency for the strategically placed, the powerful, to exploit the weaker or less favorably placed. The ways in which such a tendency works out and in which it is controlled and counteracted are almost infinitely various in different societies and social situations. Among the many possibilities, Marxian theory of capitalistic exploitation selects what it claims to be an integrated combination of reinforcing factors, the principal components of which are the use of positions of authority within organizations (the capitalistic "boss"); the exploitation of bargaining advantage in market relations (e.g., the labor market); and the use of the power of the state to the differential advantage of certain private interests ("executive committee of the bourgeoisie"). In my opinion, the Marxian view of this factor needs to be broken down into such components which are certainly independently variable and related to a variety of other factors which Marx did not consider. In the face of ideology and counterideology, this is particularly difficult but it is
essential if one is to reach a basis for a scientific judgment of the Marxian doctrine of the dynamics of capitalism.

4. There seem to be inherent tendencies for those who are structurally placed at notably different points in a differentiated social structure to develop different "cultures." There will tend to be a differentiation of attitude systems, of ideologies, and of definitions of the situation to a greater or less degree around the structure of the occupational system and of the other components of the instrumental complex, such as the relation to markets and profits. The development of these differentiated cultures may readily impede communication across the lines of these groups. Under certain circumstances, this tendency to develop a hiatus may become cumulative unless counteracted by effective integrative mechanisms. A leading modern example is the opposing ideologies of business and labor groups in modern industrial society. Marx provided a beginning of analysis in this direction—but it did not go far enough.

5. It is precisely in the area of such a subculture, which is integrated with a structural status, that the problem of articulation with kinship becomes most important. The differences in the situation of people placed at different points in the occupational system and of the consequences for family income and living conditions seem to lead to a notable differentiation of family type. In American urban society, a relatively clear differentiation of this kind has been shown to exist between "middle-class" and "lower-class" groups as they are generally called in the sociological literature. These differences are apparently such as to penetrate into the deepest psychological layers of attitude determination. There are indications from our society that the family structure of the lower groups is such as to favor attitudes which positively handicap their members in competition for status in the occupational system. The role of the integration between occupation and kinship, therefore, under certain circumstances can become an important factor in pushing toward cumulative separation of classes and potential conflict between them.

6. Absolute equality of opportunity in the occupational system, which is, in a sense, the ideal type norm for such a system, is in practice impossible. There seem to be two main types of limitation.

a) Certain of these are, as noted above, inherent in the functional requirements of family solidarity. Children must share the status of their parents, and insofar as this is differentiated, the more favored groups will have differential access to opportunity. This seems to be counteracted by certain compensating mechanisms, such as leading some of the children of the upper groups into paths which positively handicap them in occupational competition (e.g., the playboy pattern).
It may also be pointed out that a differential birth rate has a functional significance in leaving relatively more room at the top for the children of the lower groups.

b) There are important reasons to believe that the complete institutionalization of the universalistic and functionally specific standards so prominent in our occupational world is not possible in a large-scale social system. Such problems as the difficulty in establishing comparability of different lines of achievement, the lack of complete adequacy of objective standards of judgment of them, and similar things necessitate mechanisms which avoid too direct a comparison and which favor a very rough, broad scale rather than one of elaborately precise comparison. To take just one example in the academic profession, there is a wide variation of degrees of distinction between the senior members of any large university faculty. The tendency, however, is to play down these variations in favor of a broad similarity of status; for instance, as full professor, to conceal differentiations of salary within this group from public view, and to concentrate the most highly competitive elements at certain very narrowly specified points, such as the appointment to permanent rank. Considerations such as these lead to the view that there will be elements in an occupational system which run counter to the main structural type but which have the function of cushioning the impact of the latter on certain “human factors” and thus protect the stability of the system.

The fundamental problem then is how far factors such as these operate to produce deep-seated and chronic conflict between classes and how far they are counteracted by other factors in the social system such as the last mentioned. It should first, of course, be pointed out that these are not the only directions in which a structuring tending to conflict takes place. There is considerable evidence that in the modern Western World, national solidarity tends generally to take precedence over class solidarity and that, even more generally, the solidarity of ethnic groupings is of particularly crucial significance. One cannot help having the impression that in these matters Marx chose one among the possibilities rather than proving that there could be only one of crucial significance.

Furthermore, in Europe the precapitalistic residues of the old class structure in the ways in which they got tied in with the consequences of the developing industrial society have a great deal to do with the acuteness of class conflict. A good example of this is Germany with the continuing powerful position during the imperial and even the Weimar periods of the nobility and the old civil service and professional groups which were certainly not the product of the capitalistic process alone. The problem of the “threat of communism” in
Germany just before Hitler was certainly colored by their role. Class conflict certainly exists in the United States, but it is different from the German case and much less influenced than the latter by pre-capitalistic structures. Marxian theory inhibited the recognition of differences such as this—all class conflicts in a society in any sense capitalistic had to be reduced to a single pattern. Another most important set of conclusions from this type of analysis is that there must be certain elements of fundamental identity of the functional problems of social stratification and class in capitalist and socialist societies, if we have given two really fundamental elements: the large-scale organization and occupational role differentiation of industrial society and a family system. The history of Soviet Russia would seem to confirm this view. The role of the managerial and intelligentsia class, which has been progressively strengthened since the revolution, does not have a place in the Marxist utopia. In certain major respects, the role of managers and technical personnel closely resembles American society. I, for one, do not believe that there is a sharp and fundamental sociological distinction between capitalist society and all noncapitalist industrial societies. I believe that class conflict is endemic in our modern industrial type of society. I do not, however, believe that the case has been made for believing that it is the dominant feature of every such society and of its dynamic development. Its relation to other elements of tension, conflict, and dynamic change is a complex matter, about which we cannot attempt the Marxian order of generalization with certainty until our science is much further developed than it is today.

It is relevant to this set of problems that since Marx wrote, our knowledge of comparative social structures has immensely broadened and deepened. Seen in the perspective of such knowledge, the sociological emphases on the interpretation of modern Western society have shifted notably. Capitalist and socialist industrialisms tend to be seen as variants of a single fundamental type, not as drastically distinct stages in a single process of dialectic evolution. Indeed, to the modern sociologist the rigid evolutionary schema of Marxian thought appears as a strait jacket rather than a genuine source of illumination of the immensely variant facts of institutional life.

V. Conclusion

The Marxian theory of class conflict seen as a step in the development of social science rather than as a clarion call to revolution thus represents a distinct step in advance of the utilitarian background of the predominant economic thought of a century ago. Though couched in terms of a neo-Hegelian evolutionary theory of history,
it was, seen in terms of subsequent developments of social science, an advance more on the level of empirical insight and generalization from it than of the analytical treatment of dynamic factors in social process. The endless exegetical discussions of the "relations" or "conditions" of production and of what was meant or implied in them is an indication of this.

As a point of focus for the subsequent development of modern sociological theory, however, the Marxian ideas have had an important place, forming a point of departure for the formulation of many of the fundamentals of the theory of social institutions. The Marxian view of the importance of class structure has in a broad way been vindicated.

When the problem of the genesis and importance of social classes and their conflicts is approached in these modern sociological terms, however, considerable modifications of the Marxian position are necessitated. Systems of stratification in certain respects are seen to have positive functions in the stabilization of social systems. The institutionalization of motivation operates within the system of capitalistic profit making. The Marxian ideal of a classless society is in all probability utopian—above all so long as a family system is maintained but also for other reasons. The differences between capitalist and socialist societies, particularly with respect to stratification, are not as great as Marx and Engels thought.

In both types there is a variety of potential sources of class conflict centering about the structure of the productive process. Those lying within the Marxian purview are not so monolithically integrated in the process of capitalist exploitation as Marx thought, but are seen to be much more specific and in certain degrees independently variable. Some of them, like the relation to family solidarity, lay outside the Marxian focus of emphasis on the relations of production.

Insofar as Marx and Engels were true social scientists, as indeed in one principal aspect of their role they were, we justly celebrate their centennial in a scientific meeting. They promulgated ideas which were a notable advance on the general state of knowledge in the field at the time. They provided a major stimulus and definition of problems for further notable advances. They formed an indispensable link in the chain of development of social science. The fact that social science in this aspect of their field has evolved beyond the level to which they brought it is a tribute to their achievement.