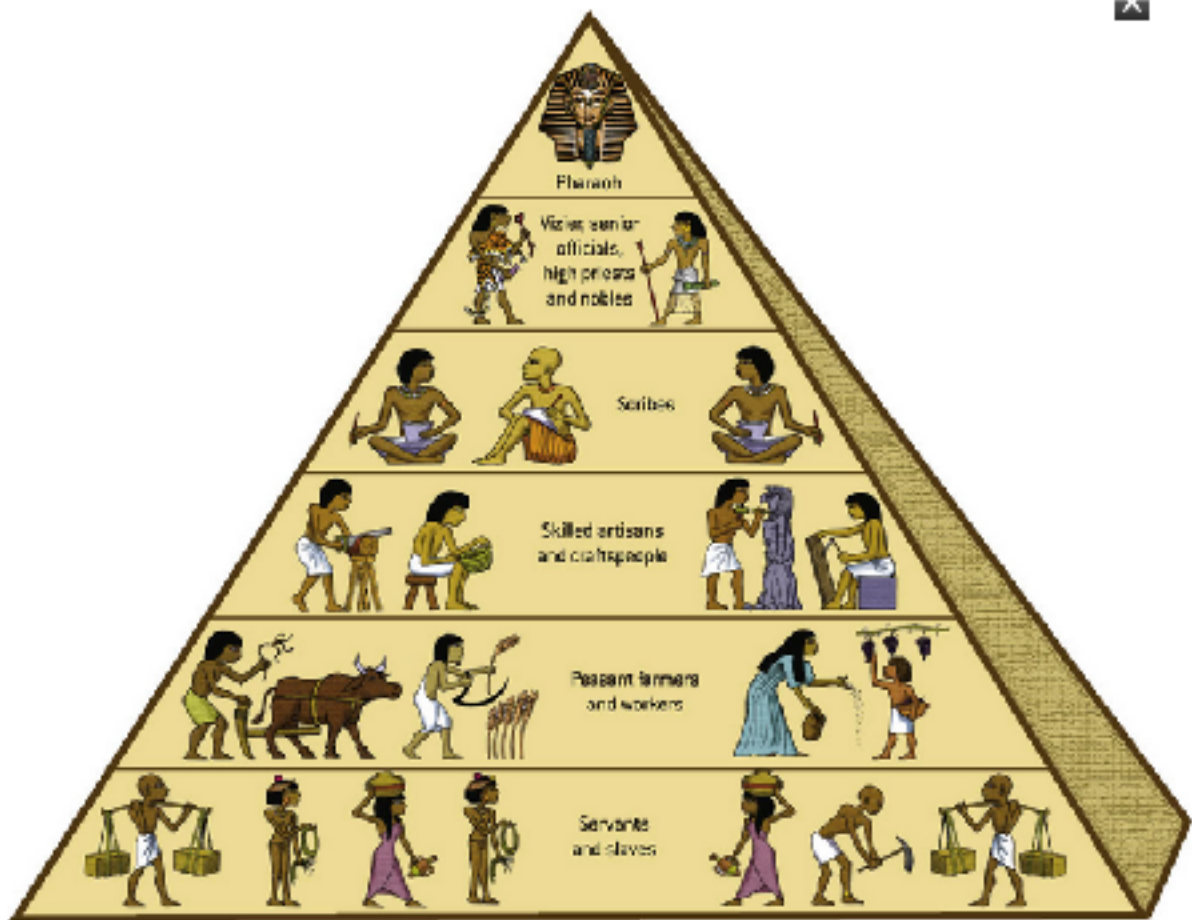


Social Hierarchy of Culture and Labour

And the chasm between intellectual and physical labour



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When I was a little boy, I had a fantasy just like every other teenager in the universe. My dream was to grow my hair out, wear ripped jeans and play the guitar, just like Jon Bon Jovi. My imaginations were ceaseless, there was no line on the horizon. But my parents found it preposterous, nonsensical and even comical. They would say that, it was not in our 'culture' to dress up like that. Apparently I was defying the norms of our society and culture by looking and acting like that.

If culture had to be described in just one word in the English language, one would have to go with - 'lifestyle'. Culture is a way of life, that is shared by a group of people. It refers to all the beliefs, values, norms and knowledge (truths) that hold a society together. It would be impossible for a society to function without it. Culture talks about the rules within a society that guide people how to live and cooperate. In the above example, wearing hipster clothes and donning long hair was not complying with the culture of my family and the area where I lived.

Of course, it might have been different if I was living in the Western USA, because the hippie culture would have been undeniably welcome there! Culture varies greatly from place to place. One of the most common examples would be the ways of greeting someone¹. In the United States, a greeting would most generally be in the form of a handshake, but in Japan, people bow to each other. In India, people fold their hands in 'namaste'.

Undoubtedly, the very definition of culture would bring about unity and oneness among people who share similar ideas and wavelengths. At the same time, this also brings about an inevitable segregation among those who do not share such parallel thoughts. A social consensus evolves; treating some cultures as paramount and formidable, and some as insignificant. In other words, some are considered 'high', while some 'low', creating a social hierarchy of culture.

But how is something being placed in this pyramid of cultures? For that, one must talk about knowledge. Because culture is lifestyle, and the latter is heavily influenced by the kind of work one does, which in turn is reliant on one's knowledge. The most basic kind of knowledge is - 'Nadir', or the functional knowledge. It refers to the skills and know-how that are required for the basic functioning of human life, namely food, clothing and shelter. For instance, the

¹ <https://www.opodo.co.uk/blog/greetings-around-the-world/>

knowledge of how to spin yarn or how to cook rice would fall into this category of knowledge. But these aren't really considered 'skilful', as they don't require much of intellectual capability. On the other hand, the 'Zenith' or the philosophical knowledge is deemed honourable. Because it's not really about growing tomatoes or selling fries. It's not physical or manual labour. It's 'intellectual', and requires one to think, contemplate, understand and make decisions accordingly. Washing clothes isn't something that requires any of the above. Yes, it is a basic necessity and essential for our survival. But it isn't any form of rocket science. Anyone with even zero intellectual prowess can learn basic chores; it doesn't require any conceptual apprehension.

It is this profound difference between physical and intellectual labour that creates a social pyramid of labor and culture, and this social division of labour has existed from time immemorial. At the apex of the hierarchy were the kings and the rulers followed by the nobles (warriors and ministers), the priests and teachers, merchants, artists and finally the slaves. In our time today, we do not have the caste system any more, and slavery has been abolished. But still, this hierarchy of labour exists, where doctors, engineers and lawyers are definitely looked up to and respected more than cleaners or the shopkeepers. The knowledge/truth that a Professor would give one at a university would assuredly be more profound than some knowledge a cleaner would give. Why? Because mental and logical capability is deemed far more supreme than blue collar work. This is how society sees it, and why this whole pyramid is created.

I personally believe that there should be no such division of physical and intellectual labor. Yes, computer science is indubitably not the same as growing apples. But one cannot survive without the other. Yes, it's true to a certain extent that anyone can learn to spin yarn, but everyone cannot become a doctor. But this surely does not imply that we create a hierarchy and look down upon the carpenters and weavers. The use of the word 'unskilled' as a prefix to labour is itself flawed. It may not be as intellectual as science, but it requires a lot of manual hard work and effort. The choice of the word is not befitting. Yes, society would collapse without lawyers and engineers. But society would also crumble if it weren't for these 'unskilled' labour.

The same can be said for the social hierarchy of cultures as well. Every individual in our world has his/her own interests. One may like rock music and another may like the Opera. But considering going to the Opera to be more prestigious and reputable than the former is very irrational. Same goes for drinking beer and having wine, the latter being considered of 'higher' culture than the former.

Of course, utopian visions are almost always just mere illusions that can never happen. And this pyramid may never be destroyed. But such classifications are ridiculous, and we must do our best to respect everyone for their hard work, be it intellectual or 'unskilled'.