

Classification: The Implications of Social Stratification

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There is a myriad of literature connecting the politics of social categories to the extensive social stratification we see today in an increasingly unequal society. Inequality in the twenty-first century has no one solution which is consistent with any social group experiencing the dynamic of wealth accumulation. The first step toward solving the problem is identifying the process of social stratification and the resulting inequality that occurs. Classification of social groups is the main tenant of identifying a meaningful methodology and determining the telos of the analyst.

While many academics take an approach to inequality in a manner regarding class stratification, there is also a body of literature to identify the characteristic of social groups distinguished between classes and the implications that this classification has. As well, it is important to note the moral implications that the classifier should account for when attempting to classify various social groups and contrast the inextricably linked society with itself. This paper will discuss some of the various issues that may arise about the classificatory nature of social relations originating with the primitive classification studied by Durkheim and Mauss. What does classification entail for social stratification beyond a classificatory function and what moral epistemologies of the foundational sociologists can be applied to a study of classification.

Class analysis is properly concerned with developing approaches and methods which might allow us to better understand and address the effects of class-based inequalities and the forms of exploitation which accompany and enable inequalities to be sustained and reproduced (Imogen, 2015, 496).

Moral meanings and moral judgements there are three roles in structuring moral life: they serve as a basis for group solidarity through identity and collective values, as a mechanism of exclusion, and moral condemnation. This structure guides a person's 'narrative coherence' in life as guidance for the person they would like to become or as a determinant to their identity (P. McKenzie-Aucoin, Lecture, Jan 20, 2020).

The answer is a surprisingly simple one, the problem that ‘class’ describes is inequality. Indeed, in whatever historical and geopolitical context they are uttered, class names (i.e. the elites, the rich, the middle classes, the working classes, the underclass), are names that variously reveal structural conditions of inequality (Imogen, 2015).

The discussion relates to the system of positions, not to the individuals occupying those positions. It is one thing to ask why different positions carry different degrees of prestige, and quite another to ask how certain individuals get into those positions. (Davis & Moore, 1945, 1).

The fundamental origins of classification can be found in an instance of foundational literature on the subject; Durkheim and Mauss study various symbols by which different cultures naturally categorize their societies and the implication of the classification. “Aristotle was the first to proclaim the existence and the reality of specific differences, to show that the means caused and that there was no direct passage from one genus to another.” (1969, 5).

Classification systems have been around for millennia; however, humans continue to make progress advancing more and more complex systems of organization. Namely indexation and taxonomy of the natural sciences and law during the 1600s, as well as bureaucratic classification by states such Prussia. Social classification systems may trace their roots back to the beginning of human history. Anthropologists make clear that the most primitive of societies often have clearly defined symbols and traditions which are unique to different groups of a tribe and may govern how they live by what they eat and whom they marry (Durkheim & Mauss, 1969, 11). Aristotle as well had a conviction of comparing according to attributes, identification of a person as having or not having certain characteristics. Classification systems are inherent to human nature. “This logical order is so rigid, the power of constraint of these categories on the mind of the Australian is so strong, that in certain cases a whole group of acts, signs, and things may be seen to be arranged according to these principles.” (Durkheim & Mauss, 1969, 16)

Karl Marx was the first to propose an analysis of class as is understood today. Marxian class analysis recognized that there is an inexorable juxtaposition between two social groups in society who struggle with each other to gain mutually desirable power and money. That struggle, which Marx witnessed take place during the industrial revolution, manifested in the position of each class in material wealth production, particularly the domain of labour in the economy. The relationship between the two classes generated immensely stratified societies (1964). “Classes do not only struggle to make history, but the struggle is what makes classes into themselves. The idea is that through conflict, classes develop a sense of themselves, and without conflict, there is no such thing as class consciousness” (Green, 2012).

Bourdieu coined various alternatives to traditional economic capital which serve a similar function in society. Cultural capital, for example, is acquired through socialization and can be determined through observation of persons' tastes in the arts or cuisine. Cultural capital functions to secure status among dominating social classes in the domain of competition over influence in society. Cultural capital may be a cause of anxiety over fear of ostracization and loss of social prestige. Like the economic capital that Marx wrote about, it is easy to obtain cultural capital through shared experiences with peers also abundant in social capital and functions to secure class stratification for the benefit of a dominating class (1984).

Class emulation, and Veblen's pecuniary emulation define the influential character of a dominating class. For example, the knowledge of instruments used in an orchestra, or expensive clothing worn by an upper-class, reflect and transmit an image of status throughout society (1899). Consumption of a wide variety of music, cuisine and forms of art from obscure cultures is considered a virtuous state of being. To be ‘cultured’ is a desired state subject to class emulation, meaning you’ve consumed a wide variety of culinary tastes, and traveled various regions (Bourdieu, 1984).

The division into classes performed by sociology leads to the common root of the classifiable practices which agents produce and of the classificatory judgments they make of other agents’ practices and

their own. ... The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu is implying that the space in which tastes are realized is within the domain of classified social groups, thus his analysis of the habitus takes this into inherent consideration. “When one speaks of the aristocratic asceticism of teachers or the pretension of the petite bourgeoisie, one is not only describing these groups by one, or even the most important of their properties but also endeavoring to name the principle which generates all their properties” (1984, 291).

Class analysis in the 21st century requires an epistemological element to decipher the origin class characteristics and the binding forces between social groups, their self-described social class and the morality that each class embodies. Social stratification is therefore guided by elements which originate within consciousness and determines factors of social cohesion as per both Weber and Durkheim (2002, 1969). According to Durkheim who saw a society bound together by solidarity class division is not just about economic wealth and power, but how we look at cultural ideas and understand them.

Marx viewed the cohesive property of morality among juxtaposing classes who were inherently at odds with one another in a struggle for economic capital. In Marx’s view, the epistemology of morality originates in different regards among persons in a modular hierarchy. The inexorable class conflict that Marx prescribed delegates his moral epistemology to the realm of hierarchies among stratified social classes (Powell, 2010). Elements of class consciousness are clear in Marxian analysis where he observes the working class being exploited by capitalist owners. Processes of devaluation which affect the moral order such as racial and religious stereotypes exemplify social stratification. To Marx, religious belief is of secondary importance to the determination of class, material wealth and power is the primary determinant (Marx, 1964).

From Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, we understand that class is not just about economics and wealth. Economic life is related to cultural ideas and religion, as ideas and religion changes, morality and sets of values change too. Protestantism is not a mutually exclusive determinant of class, however, spiritually be a supernatural governor of class ideals. New protestant sects that developed in northern Europe, had an impact on economic and political institutions after the reformation, those influenced by Calvin contributed to economic prosperity in Northern Europe and England and the rise of capitalism. Belief in the protestant ethic was the belief that God expects Christians to work hard, save earnings, invest savings and show initiative. The ethos that is the protestant ethic guided Capitalism through its most nascent period, contributing to the most fundamental form of stratification observed by Marx (2002). For protestants, divine punishments, physical or fear, religion can bring about supernatural elements pertaining to class identities and the moralities associated.

Durkheim's epistemology of Holism is an explanation of the origin of moral behaviour concerning the embodiment of morality in an interlinked society. Explanation of moral phenomenon is reducible to the integrity of society, collective action and reaction is the source of the status quo. Although Durkheim does not accept moral action as determined by the individual, he does admit that among groups it is the central actor which must be taken into consideration. Thus, from a lens of social classification, dominating class actors may have the clout required to enforce specific moral sanctions or produce moral boundaries for the sake of themselves maintain power in the integrated society. Durkheim did not believe that a specific action of an individual was the source of moral wrong or right, but the reaction of peers in the form of praise or sanction. The resulting reaction was in consideration of the effect on the integrity of society (Powell, 2010). "Durkheim often tried to show that society was the source of all moral authority, to behave morally is to act following a norm. The domain of morality is that of duty, a prescribed behaviour." (Hall, 1987)

The implications of classification are clear, on one hand, the resulting class divisions pit society against one another (Marx, 1964), however, others believe stratification is necessary to social order, mandatory to the growth of society (Davis & Moore, 1945). Most importantly it should be considered critical to sociological analysis that we understand the imbalance that social stratification entails. “Conditions of deepening economic and social inequalities urgently require a class analysis if we are to comprehend the forms of exploitation that underpin the decomposition (and recomposition) of class relations under neoliberal conditions.” (Imogen, 2015, 497).

Class, race prejudice, ethnic inequality all has a moral significance, the unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, and power foster connotations of expected social recognition. Those in society with more power and wealth can influence social values to an upper-class style and taste. The result may breed disdain of the non-wealthy, snobbery, and class contempt. Evaluative standards heard in language may lead us to understand society in a manner which is organized by a dominating class; language, hair, clothing is a set of evaluative standards which are determined by those with power to influence other members of society. The criticism and praise is internalized and decides the customs and norms from an early stage of socialization (Sayer, 2010).

Tastes and moral boundaries can reveal a lot about the morality in a stratified society in that the traits of a dominating class and the character of cultural capital which it has collectively amassed is used to influence and maintain the status quo of acceptable behaviour among the remainder of the society. Morals are usually directed downward in a dictating fashion to secure social status and develop greater cultural capital for members of the dominating class. This is desirable for the said group because of the conversion capacity of various other forms of capital and the logistics of a temporal game to keep capital in the hands of their kin. For example, high cultural capital among parents who belong to the higher classes in society may determine the number of times a child visits an art gallery. This trait of that child’s socialization may, in turn, result in a greater capacity later in life to accept and understand various cultures in the domain of a multicultural society.

This, in turn, may benefit the child as an adult in obtaining a well-paid job in a major city, translating to high economic capital. A stratified society, with distinct classification between social groups, exemplifies the conversion capacity of one capital to another as well as the collective capacity of capital in various fields in which someone has many connections within their class (Bourdieu, 1984).

Ethicists and sociologists play a critical role in classification and the politics of social categories, as well as the resultant social stratification. In societies where there is social stratification, cultural capital acquired through socialization can have a significant effect. Aristotle has a quote that must apply to the sociological analyst as well, “virtue is when people will engage in activities that will benefit the greatest number of people” What stratification research often ‘forgets’ is that it is actively engaged in the formation and establishment of the class hierarchies that it describes (Imogen, 2015). It is critical to analysis of society that which determines class stratification itself should be taken into consideration.

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