

Preface

DURING THE LAST fourteen years, while teaching a course and seminar on social stratification, I found myself confronted each year anew with the task of bringing together in a meaningful way the diverse and often contradictory contributions of the various theorists who have written on this subject. This was no simple matter, as the names of Marx, Spencer, Gumpowicz, Sumner, Veblen, Mosca, Pareto, Michels, Sorokin, Parsons, Davis, Dahrendorf, and Mills indicate.

At first it seemed that nothing could be done other than to present the works of the various writers in chronological sequence, treating each as more or less unique. Gradually, however, the possibility of a more comprehensive and meaningful organization of the materials became evident. Eventually I came to see that theories as contradictory as those of Marx and Mosca, or of Dahrendorf and Parsons, can be understood

within a single, unified framework. This becomes possible once one views the development of thought in the field from the perspective of Hegel's dialectic, with its intriguing insight that ideas generate opposing ideas, and that the resulting struggle between them generates a synthesis which incorporates elements of both within a new and distinctive context.

Applying the Hegelian dialectic to the past, one easily discovers a meaningful pattern in the otherwise confusing history of stratification theory. Since ancient times, the basic controversies have been between two schools of thought, one made up of the proponents of a conservative thesis that social inequality is both inevitable and just, the other of proponents of a radical antithesis that it is neither.

But the dialectical view of stratification theory is more than a useful device for summarizing the work of the past. It also sensitizes one to current trends and developments, and provides a basis for anticipating future ones. Above all, it sensitizes one to the recent emergence of a third theoretical position which, in Hegelian terms, can only be described as a synthesis.

One of the chief aims of this volume has been to create a greater awareness of this development, which I believe is widely sensed but seldom verbalized. Such awareness is prerequisite to more rapid progress in stratification theory and research.

A second, and no less basic, aim of this volume is to describe and advance the synthesis. In particular, I have sought to refine and sharpen the statement of the synthesis by relating its basic propositions to the broadest possible range of ethnographic, historical, and sociological data, in the belief that the inductive method is no less important in theory building than the deductive.

I am not so naïve as to suppose that what follows represents the synthesis toward which stratification theory is moving. However, I am certain that such a synthesis *is* emerging, and that I have identified its basic outlines with some accuracy. I am encouraged in my belief by several recent publications, notably those of Ossowski and van den Berghe, which indicate that others are arriving, independently, at a similar point of view.

In order to develop a systematic body of theory, and not merely a collection of conceptual categories, I begin the statement of the synthesis with certain basic postulates about the nature of man and society (Chapter 2). These serve as the basis for a series of general propositions about the dynamics of the distributive process and the structures they generate (Chapters 3 and 4). These, in turn, serve as the foundation for

a series of more specific propositions about the distributive systems of five basic types of societies (Chapters 5 to 12).

This ordering of materials may suggest a largely deductive approach on the part of the author, with certain postulates and propositions being accepted uncritically, followed by a search for evidence to support them. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The theory was developed by means of both induction and deduction, and when it did not fit the facts, it was modified. When the process began some years ago, the theory was much closer to the functionalists' position than it is at present; exposure to an ever wider range of comparative materials forced a shift which, unfortunately, is not visible in this volume.

Some may question the heavy reliance on the inductive approach since it is currently fashionable in certain sociological circles to equate theory building with a purely deductive approach. Happily, this fashion seems to be dying as its essential sterility becomes more and more evident and as the theoretical importance of induction is more clearly recognized.

From the methodological standpoint, the data used in testing the theory are far from ideal. Systematic, quantitative data would be much better. However, this would take a large, well-financed team of scholars a decade or more, and even then it is doubtful whether accurate measures of all the variables could be obtained for anything resembling a representative sample of societies. Suffice it to say that the present data were not gathered with an eye to proving preconceived hypotheses. Rather, every effort was made to read the relevant literature as widely as possible to determine the degree to which deductive hypotheses were supported. In presenting findings, I have tried to keep the quantitative model in mind, and therefore have striven to identify and report not only the central tendencies, but also the ranges, deviations, and, where present, skewing tendencies. Needless to say, I look forward to the day when more precise techniques can be introduced.

This book differs from most of the current volumes in this area in several ways that deserve at least brief note. First, it is focused on the *causes* of stratification rather than its consequences. The latter have received far more attention, probably because they are more readily amenable to study by means of the currently popular survey research method. Without denying the importance of the latter, I believe the study of causes is even more important and deserving of investigation.

Second, as its title indicates, this volume is focused on *power* and *privilege* rather than prestige. The reasons for this will become clearer later (see especially Chapters 2 and 3).

Finally, I have taken the liberty of redefining the field. I equate social stratification with *the distributive process in human societies—the process by which scarce values are distributed*. Though superficially unorthodox, I believe this definition reflects the central concern of major stratification theorists far more accurately than most current definitions, which identify the field with the study of social classes or strata. These are merely the structural units which sometimes emerge as a result of the workings of the distributive process, but the process itself is the basic phenomenon.

Before concluding, I must express my appreciation to certain persons and organizations. Above all, I am indebted to the many scholars upon whose work I have drawn for stimulation, and whose ideas and research I have so often incorporated into this volume. As far as possible, I have attempted to credit their contributions in footnotes and bibliography, but I realize that one can never fully acknowledge the extent of his indebtedness in this way.

The many students who participated in my stratification seminar during the last twelve years have also made a substantial contribution. More than anyone else, they made me dissatisfied with a simple eclectic or historical approach to stratification theory.

I owe a very special debt of gratitude to the Social Science Research Council and its Executive Associate, Dr. Elbridge Sibley, for support which freed me from my normal academic responsibilities for a number of months. I am also indebted to the Institute for Research in Social Science of the University of North Carolina for secretarial assistance, and to both that university and the University of Michigan for intellectual stimulation and the opportunity to do the necessary research.

Various scholars have been good enough to read all or part of the manuscript and offer suggestions and criticisms. These include Robert Bellah, Peter Carstens, John Gulick, John Honigmann, Richard Simpson, and Gideon Sjoberg. I have benefited greatly from their comments, many of which led to important revisions.

Finally, I owe an immense debt to my wife, to whom this book is gratefully dedicated, and without whose constant support and encouragement it would never have been written. In addition, I am especially grateful for her careful and invaluable editing of the manuscript.

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