

On Criteria for Social Stratification from the Perspective of Social Change

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ABSTRACT. *The criteria for social stratification change along with social change. A study of criteria for social stratification of prominent theories in the field: Marxian theory, Weberian theory, and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, is conducted from the perspective of social change. From the ownership of means of production to multidimensions of wealth, power and prestige, and then to consumption patterns characterized by taste, the changing criteria for social stratification are the result of social differentiation in the process of social change.*

KEYWORDS: *criteria for social stratification, social change, Marxian theory, Weberian theory, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital*

1. Introduction

Social stratification is a fundamental aspect of virtually all social processes. In essence it is the differentiation in distribution of comparatively scarce social resources and accesses to them. Due to various forms of such differentiation, social members stand in different positions, which inevitably results in hierarchical orders. Social stratification lies at the core of a society as it links almost all aspects of the society together.

Social stratification represents a controversial field of study, with the long-term debate of its criteria. Whether the applied criteria are economic, political, occupational, or in other forms, different criteria interrelate closely with each other. In different periods of time, the criteria have all the earmarks of the specific era. A more in-depth study of social stratification does not simply mean an increasingly elaborate description of more social groups, but the change of criteria along with social change.

Theorists and researchers of different schools have been studying social

stratification in their own fields. Differences are more of criteria for social stratification than of stratification itself. For the two prestigious schools of social stratification theories—Marxian theory and Weberian theory, their basic divergences lie in the set and application of different criteria. The basics of Marxian theory—class theory, adopts a one-dimensional economic criterion, claiming that status differentiation can ultimately be judged by means of production. The fundamental feature of Weberian stratification theory is the three-dimensional criteria of not only economy, but also politics and culture. Later studies continue to focus on other characteristics of the society, such as Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, within the consumer society context. In different stages of social development, with the visual angle consistently adjusted to contemporary social contexts, criteria defined for social stratification are always changing, and often turn to be more inclusive.

2. Marxian theory: the ownership of means of production

On social stratification, Marxian theory explores the root of inequality under private ownership: “The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with clash antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.” [1] In his time, mode of production and distribution became the most prominent aspect in unveiling social relations. Accordingly, Marxian theory regards those forms of property—land, capital, and labor force as the key factors in unequal distribution. One-dimensional stratification criterion, that is, the ownership of means of production among different social groups, is adopted, and economic status is the utmost important criterion in differentiating social classes. Due to different economic statuses, people differentiated in lifestyle and education degree, etc. and formed accordingly different social classes.

This stratification theory was therefore a theory of class divisions, in which class and class conflict originate in the private ownership of means of production, and the developing process of history was simultaneously the process of major means of production transferring from one class to another. [2] In pre-industrial society, with land as the major means of production, the owners of land—aristocrats, slave-owners, and the oppressed class of serfs, slaves and yeomen represented the two opposing classes. While in industrial society, capital was the fundamental means of production, resulting in the sharp and simple division between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Two reasons explain why Marxian theory regards means of production as the most important social resources and therefore the most significant criterion for social stratification. On one hand, ownership of means of production determines different statuses and roles of people in the process of production (whether they are leaders and determiners or compliers and operators), ways of distribution, and the amount of resources possessed (whether by direct profit or by wages, and whether it is of great quantity or of meager amount). On the other hand, ownership of means of production results directly in differences of people's lifestyle, that is, those who own

a great amount of means of production lead their lives by exploiting others, and those who own a small amount earn a living through their own laboring, while those who possess nothing at all have to sell their labor power. Consequently, ownership of means of production determines not only economic condition but also social status.

3. Weberian theory: multidimensions of economy

Weberian theory, like Marxian theory, takes property and its ownership as the axis of inequality and stratification in the society. It also identifies the dimension of status, and the capability of imposing one person or group's will upon another—that is, power—as independent variables contributing to social stratification. It is believed that in any society, there exists three independent but correlated orders, namely, economic orders, social orders, and political orders. Though economic orders are indeed significant, they cannot substitute and determine the function of the other two. Correspondingly, Weberian criteria for stratification are multidimensional: wealth based on market opportunity, prestige based on social evaluation, and power based on competitive politics. Each of the three basic orders has their own way of distribution, thus forming respectively the ranking system.

First, economic order and stratification. While Marxian theory emphasizes “production” in economic field, Weberian theory attaches great importance to “market” in economic order. Individual capabilities and opportunities are vital in differentiating stratification. In other words, the causal factor of stratification is the distribution of economic interests, and to be more specific, the distribution related to market.

Second, social order and stratification. Weberian theory stresses “prestige” in social order, especially one that is conferred by the legal system. Groups enjoying extraordinary prestige (such as aristocrats) often possess higher ranks, which root in the social system, and are not necessarily pertinent to economic classes. Hierarchical ranks are closely related to certain honors, which are in essence specific social symbols. Those who enjoy such an honor form a social group of comparatively stable social status.

Third, political order and stratification. Weberian theory argues that political power is usually held by political parties that dominate the society after they seize state power. Therefore, members of ruling parties (especially the leaders) take up considerably high positions in social stratification.

4. Marxian theory and Weberian theory: a comparison

Weberian multidimensional system presents, to some degree, a more inclusive and subtler picture of stratification. While Marxian theory divides capitalist society to two polarities, Weberian theory ranks people in sequential hierarchies. Such a difference is not only on the variation from single to multiple criteria, but reflects the changing perspective and view of value. The transition goes along with social

change, as the development and division of society constantly put forward new challenges on previous criteria. The former relatively simple society with plain social resources gradually becomes more variegated and complicated with abundant kinds of resources and a multiplicity of stratification forms. The study of social stratification therefore tends to be more diversified.

Marxian theory and Weberian theory represent the two traditional schools of social stratification research. As pioneers in the field of social stratification, they exert profound influence on subsequent studies. Though innovative in one way or another, many researchers thereafter follow their angles of productivism, and inherit their fundamental criteria for social stratification. This is determined by the general social background—the producer society, in which production lie in the center of the whole society.

5. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital

Since 1960s and 1970s, Western society began to enter a new phase centering on consumption, usually referred to as consumer society, in which consumption became the leading factor and driving force in social production. Along with the continuing social development, the impact of consumption on social life gains momentum. As a prominent social phenomenon, consumption enters the field of sociology as a focal point in social stratification study. Since different social strata have different consumption patterns, consumption itself functions as an important criterion for indicating social stratification.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital selects an important index of consumption—taste, and especially cultural taste, as the cut-in point, and elucidates the relationship between consumption and social stratification. Taste can signify social stratification, as different tastes are produced by different social strata. Once tastes come into being, they take the responsibility of distinguishing social strata. Three forms of capital—economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital can transform under certain circumstances. For example, the production and reproduction of cultural capital holds a close relation with family and school education, which is pertinent to economic capital. Children from families with abundant economic capital have easy access to high-quality family and school education, while families lacking economic capital cannot afford equivalent accesses. Such differences accumulate during a long process and may finally lead to differentiated tastes and different social strata. The upper class pay attention to their dressing and manners, and enjoy their leisure time by watching operas, playing golf, etc. Even if the lower class have economic capital, they may lack cultural capital, such as the cultural sentiment to appreciate delicate works of art. Taste can therefore represent a group's status in social hierarchical system.

6. Conclusion

The development of society results in people's angle of vision on interpreting

and analyzing such development. The adoption of new criteria does not mean the expiration of the former ones, but that the way and degree of their functioning has changed. Therefore, the change of criteria for social stratification has its momentous significance of an era, and such change guarantees that the study of social stratification can be carried out effectively, and at the same time, helps understand social stratification within the framework of social change.

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