

Name : C Sountharam

Address : 9/42 John Street, Ashfield, NSW 2131

Email : csountharam@hotmail.com

Tel (h) : 61 2 97164827

Module : Introduction to Social Analysis – CBS1103

Trainer : Mrs Beate Steller

Assignment : Assignment No 3 – Although commentators may agree that an understanding of social class is important for an understanding of our society, there is considerable difference over what they mean by social class.

Discuss the differing approaches to the definition of social class, and reflect on how they might influence the conclusions we draw about inequality in Australian society.

Term : 1 year 2003

Date : 2003-05-13

Although commentators may agree that an understanding of social class is important for an understanding of our society, there is considerable difference over what they mean by social class.

Discuss the differing approaches to the definition of social class, and reflect on how they might influence the conclusions we draw about inequality in Australian society.

Class is the main organising system of modern capitalist society by which power, privilege and inequality are distributed and institutionalised (Goodman, 1992). It involves analysis of the structure of the society as a whole (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 1979). According to the Marxist view economic production becomes the fundamental around which all other social activities are structured (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 1979). Therefore it is essential to understand social class to understand our society. Class is multidimensional, and three main factors contribute to it, wealth, power and social prestige (Goodman, 1992). Class is a complex structure and an individual may not possess all the attributes of any given class. To a large extent class determines person's position and how they themselves are influenced by class. It also influences life opportunities and expectations. Therefore, class is about inequality, opportunities, and power. Various theories offer explanation of the definition and existence of social class. These are generally based on a structured functionalist view or a conflict view (Goodman, 1992). To understand how these theories reflect and influence the notion on inequality in Australia's social classes, this paper explores different classes in Australia and how these may contribute to inequality.

Australia is believed to be a classless society. But, it is impossible to understand Australia or the lives of Australians without referring to class (Mcgregor, 1997). It helps to explain

everything from ‘ lifestyles to accents, from voting patterns to real estate prices, from TV soaps to social climbers to the politics of the labour party, from John Howard to Ita Buttrose to Paul Hogan, from the social makeup of Australian cities to the myths and images juggled by the advertising agencies, to the most profound conflicts within Australian culture’ (McGregor, 1997., p.2). Therefore to live in Australia, we have to realise and understand that different social classes have different jobs, live in different suburbs, go to different schools, get different incomes, speak different ways, experience crucial differences in privilege and inequality.

There are said to be three main classes in Australia – the upper class, the middle class and the working class. The boundaries between these classes can be disputed (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small minority of the population regarded as ‘upper class’. Their wealth is derived from direct ownership of property and capital (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). A middle class consists of individuals with non manual occupations. They enjoy the benefits of high income. The white collar workers like secretaries, clerks and shop assistants are ‘lower middle class’ (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). The working class people are defined as having non ownership of production, their role is to provide labour to the dominant or ‘ruling class’ (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). The concept of an underclass was constructed in 1987 for people who are unemployed long term and others dependant on welfare payments and aboriginal people (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). Family break up, drug and alcohol misuse, and crime appear to be the consequences of an underclass phenomenon. Significantly the social disadvantage

transfer from generation to generation.

According to the functionalist view some form of stratification is inevitable socially.

They view society as composed of a complex system of statuses and roles. In order for a society to function those 'statuses' must be occupied by well qualified people. The most important positions require extensive training. Subsequently the person undertaking such responsibility has to be compensated with high rewards and opportunities. Therefore society develops some systems of unequal rewards. Functionalist argues that talents and skills are not equally distributed in society (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 1979). Thus stratification is necessary to motivate those with necessary skills to occupy necessary positions and maintain stability in the society. This case appeals to the professional class or 'upper class' in society but creates inequality (Goodman, 1992). The Functional importance of any position in society can be difficult to establish, and for example a garbage collector who requires little skill and training, is essential for the community as well as a doctor (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). This possibly creates unequal life opportunities and rewards for the society. Stratification also tends to perpetuate inequality. People in a hierarchy tend to foster their children's interest and perhaps deny opportunities to those with superior talent. This is reflected in Steing and Wai's study of interlocking directorates (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996) Such situation can harm both parties and deprive society of talent (Goodman, 1992). In functionalist theory the society is a meritocracy, in which the relationship between qualities and rewards earned does not reflect reality (Goodman, 1992). There are two types of inequality which are inherent inequality and inequality by merit. The first

inequality occurs 'biologically' and the later because of a meritocracy society based on assignment of position and greater social rewards (Mckee, 1981).

Karl Marx argued that there are only two major classes in society ; masters and slaves in ancient societies, lords and serfs in feudal societies and capitalist and wage labourers in a capitalist societies (Goodman, 1992). In other words there are only two classes in society : those who own the means of production and those who do not. He saw the divisions stemming from the difference in ownership of wealth and production as inherently exploitative (Goodman, 1992). This is a characteristic feature of inequality in society and can be perceived in various ways for example economic inequality, access to material resources, and inequality of status (Jamrozik, 1991). There is also a middle class in Australian society which can be said to contradict Marx's two –class view.

Like Marx, Weber saw class in economic terms. In Weber's terminology power is the capacity to get things done (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 1979). Therefore economic wealth is the power to get what one desires. All forms of inequality are inequality of power. The three dimensions to power are economic, prestige and absolute power (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 1979). Both Marx and Weber focused on conflict aspects of social life rather than integration that refer to class struggle, domination and subordination. This conflict implies a hierarchical order and stratified society (Jamrozik, 1991).

Theories have a practical basis for stratification that perceives inequality in the classes. In a general consensus there is more than one way class inequality can be interpreted; the

role of the educational system, changes in the occupational structure, women's role in the economy, access and equity (Worsley 1991). Stratification is not only economic but has a significant base of social prestige and of power in its own right. For example, political party- basis to exercise power does not derive simply and directly from ownership of wealth or from having an established position in the society (Worsley, 1991). Such theories of stratification focus on individuals rather than groups or institutions and make it difficult to identify how some groups of individuals engage in organised social and economic actions (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). The types of variables used in mobility research are unpredictable and makes it difficult to pinpoint class relations in the Australian society (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996). Especially in the Marx and Weber perspective, theories concentrate on level of income and neglect the examination of the ownership of wealth and property or the source and type of income (Haralambos, Krieken, Smith & Holborn, 1996).

In conclusion, it is difficult to discuss stratification without either justifying or attacking it. Most theories of stratification explain why there must be inequality in society. There are a number of ways inequality has been justified, but mainly tends to fall into two main perspectives: Inherent inequality explains the biological superiority and Inequality by merit that endorses opportunities for qualified people. The functionalist view supports the latter and asserts that in every society there are some positions that are of greatest importance and require a great amount of training or talent. From a functionalist perspective, stratification is an unconsciously evolved device. In contrast, Marx argues that private ownership of the means of production created the oppressive class system.

Likewise, Weber asserts that the class struggle is over the distribution of goods in which power is significant to distribution. Theories which justify inequality can be seen as convenient rationalizations (Mckee, 1981). The existence of inequality is seen by some as a persistent feature in Australian society. Classlessness, it would seem, is an idea whose time has not come yet. Therefore class is important in Australia, even more today, because inequalities appear to be increasing.

Bibliography

Cuff, E.C., Sharrock, W.W., & Francis, D.W. (1979). *The Perspectives in Sociology*. New York: Unwin Hyman Ltd.

Goodman, N (1992). *Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

Haralambos, M, Krieken, R.V, Smith, P & Holborn, M (1996) *Sociology themes and perspectives – Australian edition*. Melbourne: Longman.

Jamrozik, A. (1991). *Class inequality and the state*. Melbourne: The Macmillan company of Australia Pty. Ltd.

McGregor, C. (1997). *Class in Australia* (p.p.2). Victoria: Penguin book Australia Ltd

McKee, J. (1981). *Sociology – The study of society*. New York: CBS College Publishing.

Worsley, P. (1991). *The Sociology Readings*. Engalnd: Penguin group.