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## SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND THE POLITICAL ORDER

HOWARD M. BROTZ

### ABSTRACT

Social status and stratification are examined in relation to the political order, seen as the hierarchy of political interests or of public respect. Social status and stratification, in their modern sense, are then presented as based on the respect which individuals grant each other in private life. They become meaningful conceptions in a society when there is a divergence between privately held standards and those which prevail politically. The functions of social stratification are then discussed, which include the maintenance of intermediate authority. A scale of three examples of this authority is presented.

Although the study of social stratification has made tremendous progress in the last decades, there still remains, as specialists in this field have noted, a theoretical difficulty. There are certain types of individuals or groups whom it is extremely difficult to fit into the main status hierarchy of a community in a convincing and unambiguous way.<sup>1</sup> Minorities as a whole and individual members of them, whose status in outside social circles is marginal by virtue of their origins, are prominent examples. Of even greater theoretical significance, however, are those familiar cases of individuals who have great political authority but lower social status. How is one to rank, for example, a governor who is openly a member of a minority which is excluded from elite social clubs? He might not even be able to afford, politically, to join one of these clubs were an invitation to do so proffered.

The usual way of resolving this difficulty is, in practice, to describe the society in terms of discrete hierarchies—a status hierarchy, status hierarchies of subgroups, hierarchies of authority and power. Within limits this will work very well. If individuals who are marginal members of minorities, such as assimilated members of the minority upper classes, cannot be clearly placed within the main status hierarchy, at least their marginality in their relations with the minority can be clearly described, as numerous studies have shown.

Nonetheless, as a general theoretical ori-

<sup>1</sup> John F. Cuber and William F. Kenkel, *Social Stratification in the United States* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954), p. 27.

entation this is far from satisfactory; it abandons what is most valuable in the theoretical rationale of the central importance of social stratification, that is, the understanding that a society must have some over-all principle that establishes what is respected and that even the presence of conflicting standards in itself exhibits a principle.

As is readily understandable, theoretical difficulties will have empirical repercussions. In the absence of a comprehensive principle that adequately explains the precise relationship of the crucial hierarchies of social status and political authority to each other, one is without adequate guidance in determining how decisive each is in shaping the structure and character of the society. Without such a principle there is no brake against the mutual reduction of these hierarchies to each other, although this has predominantly been in the direction of reducing authority to status, that is, treating the former as a criterion of the latter.

This reductionism, if pressed to the logical extreme, could lead to such conclusions as that it is more important to be the president of a private university than to be president of the country. And, in general, the whole sphere of status may be invested with an importance which it may not possess. If people "count" socially and have little or no influence in setting the tone of that society, one cannot simply regard their status as an unequivocal index of their importance without begging the whole question of what it means to "count." Furthermore, from within the perspective of a status hierarchy, conceived of as the main hierarchy to which

all others are reduced, one is compelled to be silent about or to minimize the importance of such things as class conflicts which press for a solution in political terms. There has always been an uneasy lack of articulation in American sociology between the approaches of Warner and Lynd.

Is there a way of untying the Gordian knot without cutting it? Is there a way of interrelating the various hierarchies in the society without fundamentally reducing them one to the other? I suggest the following approach as an alternative, which, though provisional, has already proved useful in actual research.

Social stratification may be best understood by relating it to the political context in which it arises and is maintained. This political context is the sphere in which various interests—the poor, the rich, the middle class, religious factions, minority ethnic groups—compete for a share of political authority, for the power, that is, to establish what is publicly respected in that society. The outcome is a hierarchy of all the interests which effectively claim some right to be heard in determining this hierarchy, which becomes thus a measure of their political strength. The recent changes in the segregation laws following upon the northward migration of the Negro are a convenient case in point. The claims of the Negro can no longer be ignored because he is now a political force to be reckoned with. Yet the fact that he cannot be elected to governorships, let alone the presidency, must equally be taken into account in estimating his political strength at a given time.

This hierarchy, which is characterized in its essential respects by the kind of political interest which dominates it, is the political order. Such, for example, would be plutocracy, aristocracy, or democracy in its older political meaning. In this sense it is not primarily defined by a set of legal-institutional arrangements or by an equality in the direct management of political affairs from public offices. (These, in any but the smallest societies, must always remain in the hands of a minority of the people.) It is

defined rather by a distribution of political power within a broad civic body—rather than a narrow one based, for example, upon a high property qualification—which distribution will be reflected in the interests advanced in the public arena, the kind of men selected for public life, and the moral and cultural standards these men uphold.

Within a range democracies can vary in the composition of the politically predominant class. As Lubell has shown, the middle class in the United States holds the balance of political power. Its strength, as measured by its ability to establish the standard for participation in public life, is shown in an interesting way by his analysis of minorities. None of the American minorities, as he makes clear, was aroused into political protest when it was at the very bottom of society and its grievances were heaviest; nor have sheer numbers been sufficient for political power. The Mexican-Americans in the Southwest are a sizable group. Yet, economically depressed in the lowest stratum of society, they are politically inert. For a minority to become conscious of itself as a political entity and of its right to enter the public realm, make political claims in its interest, and elect public officials from within its own ranks, it must have some foothold in the middle class, with all that this implies in terms of educational, economic, and social qualifications.<sup>2</sup> In this sense the political order establishes the attributes of the "first-class" citizens and is, in fact, constituted by the kinds of men who are the first-class citizens.<sup>3</sup> As understood in this way, the political order is more comprehensive than and prior to any other hierarchy and for two reasons which are really the reciprocal of each other.

The first is that the attributes of the first-class citizens, of those who can hold their heads up in public with all the self-confidence of a ruling class, of those whose attri-

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 79–85.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), pp. 1–85.

butes are not handicaps to them in public life, will be the standards that are really respected in that society. This is the import of not having to conceal one's attributes and qualities. A self-made man in a society dominated by self-made men has an altogether different bearing than he would have in a hereditary aristocracy. By the same token, an aristocracy which rules can affect tastes in a way which it can hardly do when after a democratization the very remnants of its position are suspect. If power, in short, is ashamed to become visible, it cannot exert moral authority. To the extent, then, that a group is publicly authoritative and its standards and outlook are the ruling principles, it sets the tone for the whole society. Just as a single institution will be influenced by the example of the men who direct it, so will the entire institutional fabric of a society be affected by the kind of men who are held in public respect and whose standards can never be simply ignored. Even those who privately despise the standards of the ruling class do so all the more because they have to acknowledge in some way its authoritative position.<sup>4</sup>

The second reason is simply the political implication of the above: this is, that from within the perspective of human societies as political societies, the composition of the body of first-class citizens cannot help but be the crucial internal political question. It is, in fact, *the* political basis of civil wars and revolutions. When one considers the central role of moral evaluation in social and political life, it must follow that human

<sup>4</sup> A complete analysis of this problem cannot be attempted here. It may suffice, simply to indicate the direction which the analysis would have to take, to note the implication of the difference between purely private power and public authority—of the differences, for example, between a leader of a political party or faction with armed men at his disposal and a general of an army or between a presidential candidate and the man as president. In each of the latter cases the man can raise a moral claim to rule, by virtue of the fact that he can speak as a representative of the whole, which the former cannot. By empirical observation one would then have to show how clearly this moral claim is the basis of respect in the constitution of human societies.

beings cannot be neutral about the kinds of men in their society who have genuine, public authority and about the things for which they stand. Even a man who seeks martyrdom above all other things, though this is hardly the model for political activity, would have to admit that he requires a political framework in which authority cares about his opinions.

If the political order, then, is the public or authoritative distribution of respect, social stratification is based on the rank or esteem which individuals grant each other in an essentially private sphere. It is thus to be contrasted with every form of authoritative determination of rank, prestige, legal status, privilege, honor, or dishonor—by political, legal, or ritual sanctions—where the respect with which an individual will be treated is commensurable with and based upon his political strength. Such, for example, would be the deference granted to an absolute monarch who holds the power of life and death over his subjects or, at the other extreme, the public humiliation of powerless groups regarded as pariahs, where they are not allowed to use the ordinary wells or drinking fountains or are required to wear a distinctive garb. Similarly, we may regard the stratification of a caste system or an estate system as the political order, noting that political action which is or nearly is revolutionary in character is usually required to bring them to an end.

In sharp contrast to this, social status in its modern and, perhaps, essential meaning and the correlative conceptions of social stratification, social equality, and social inequality constitute an independence of the political order. They arise as meaningful elements in the life of a society and, significantly, as conceptions of it<sup>5</sup> when there

<sup>5</sup> The earliest date in the English language for the term "status," meaning social standing, is 1820 (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Tocqueville, to my knowledge, does not use the term "social equality" at all. For Bryce, however, it becomes a problem to clarify the meaning of the term "equality" and to distinguish between its political and social forms (James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* [2d rev. ed.; London: Macmillan & Co., 1889], II, 615–26).

is an important divergence between what some sizable group regards as ideal and the kind of men who have either political authority or the wealth which it is possible to accumulate within that political framework.<sup>6</sup> Wealth, because of the universal admiration it commands and the power it makes possible, is something about which political beings can never be neutral. The implications of this are seen whenever aristocracies are displaced from power or come into competition with a rising bourgeoisie. Class distinctions, based on their qualifications in the past, are generated and invested with seriousness as a way of ridiculing the ascendant class to which they would have been oblivious in the period when they firmly ruled. By the same token, in every capitalist democracy there is a chronic divergence between the political dominance of the average man and the self-esteem of the successful man, let alone those who have pretensions to a hereditary, aristocratic status.

Now no society can so control a man's mind that it can prevent him from making a private judgment about the worth of himself and others, and very few men, if any, do not think that they are better than they are actually treated. Insofar as these facts are at the root of social stratification, it is thus rooted in the private character of thought and in the workings of vanity and pride, hence in human nature itself. But, for social stratification to emerge, it must be more than completely private or subjective. It must be "social." It must, that is, rest upon shared opinion which thus presupposes some institutions or more or less informal groups to fix them and be their carriers. This, in turn, presupposes a political

<sup>6</sup> They thus presuppose, as an ultimate cultural precondition, a society in which the idea has taken shape that there are ideals of this character or, more specifically, moral-political standards with which to judge the distribution and use of wealth and power. Cf. Edmund Burke's analysis of the way in which the manners of chivalry formed the character of modern Europe (*Reflections on the Revolution in France* [New York: "Everyman's Library," 1910], pp. 73-74).

order which permits freedom of association for informal groups and voluntary associations—freedom not merely in a formal legal sense but in the additional sense of freedom from those social pressures which would make it impossible for the groups to hold together. The fact that the freedom is constituted by the political order, however, means that the very independence of that order is derivative. Social stratification is derivative not merely because its very reason for coming into existence is that it is a reaction against a specific type of political order. More fundamentally, it is because it requires political freedom to exist at all and thus presupposes a specific political framework. This particular framework is the liberal state.<sup>7</sup>

Now the most clear-cut manifestation of social stratification is, of course, the formation of social classes which takes place when people have the freedom to choose those with whom they will associate and those whom they will marry—choices which are not dictated by any political necessity. This organization of private life reaches its apogee in "Society," which in its pure form looks as though it is completely separated from the "state." This thus echoes the distinction between state and society which is the main tenet of liberal theory of the nineteenth century. In its pure form, as it exists for all practical purposes in the United States, outside the diplomatic circles in Washington, and in France,<sup>8</sup> it is completely

<sup>7</sup> Some of the difficulties of contemporary stratification theory arise from the fact that it has universalized in concepts what are only the particular properties of this type of society. L. A. Fallers, in an unpublished paper, "Despotism, Status Culture, and Social Mobility in an African Kingdom," explicitly deals with the problem of analyzing the stratification of a society which lacks the very idea of social strata as understood in the West. This use of the comparative method to become aware of possible ethnocentricity in the conceptions of a theoretical framework itself and, hence, of the possibility of a more comprehensive understanding of these conceptions is a novel and important contribution.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Herbert Luethy, *France against Herself* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 38.

autonomous, completely independent of any political pressure in determining its members. Otherwise it would lose its private character. As such, it determines its own rules of admission to its private circle—one form or another of a convivial set—and in so doing confers social status or standing. All social qualifications—wealth, birth, personality, education, even political authority itself—are translated by it, which in practice means its private ruler, in independence of the political order and as freely as it wishes, into its own qualifications for admission. To conform completely to the pure type, it would have to have the right to exclude any one whom it wishes.<sup>9</sup> It would thus be impossible in a perfect despotism where the despot would fear the existence of any autonomous groups as a threat to his power.

What does social stratification “do” in modern societies? As may already be evident, the point of view underlying this analysis is that the basic integrative structure of a society is the political order. This is the locus of all serious claims in the society, which by virtue of the nature of social and political life cannot be concerned with the right to the friendship or the convivial association of another. Friendship, in other words, when it becomes politically compulsory, is no longer friendship. When social distinctions, however, become matters of public treatment, such as the right to enter public schools, the right to public employment, and even rights in quasi-public situations such as the right to enter restaurants, then these distinctions are capable of becoming serious and, hence, political issues. Thus the way in which all the serious and conflicting claims are resolved, whether they are in some degree harmonized or whether they have traveled such a course that they can be settled only by an appeal to force, gives to a society whatever inte-

gration it possesses. As suggested by Hobbes and others, a distinguished society is one which is on the brink of or actually engaged in civil war. To the extent, then, that the political order is the integrative structure, we may say that statesmanship, tact, and diplomacy are the integrative or political arts.

In the light of this we may say that the functions of social stratification, conceived now as the formation of private groups and voluntary associations, are twofold. The first is to provide a depoliticized “escape” from the political order in the creation of a sphere which is on the surface of things independent of that order. Tocqueville has stated this in a way which goes to the heart of the matter:

No state of society or laws can render men so much alike but that education, fortune, and tastes will interpose some differences between them; and though different men may sometimes find it their interest to combine for the same purposes, they will never make it their pleasure. They will therefore always tend to evade the provisions of law, whatever they may be; and escaping in some respect from the circle in which the legislator sought to confine them, they will set up, close by the great political community, small private societies united together by similitude of conditions, habits, and customs.

The Americans, who mingle so readily in their political assemblies and courts of justice, are wont carefully to separate into small distinct circles in order to indulge by themselves in the enjoyments of private life. Each of them willingly acknowledges all his fellow citizens as his equals, but will only receive a very limited number of them as his friends or his guests. This appears to me to be very natural. In proportion as the circle of public society is extended, it may be anticipated that the sphere of private intercourse will be contracted; far from supposing that the members of modern society will ultimately live in common, I am afraid they will end by forming small coteries.<sup>10</sup>

This is confirmed by the ambiguity of social stratification. Everyone knows who

<sup>9</sup> Unlike the registers of titled nobility in Europe, one's name can be dropped from the *Social Register* on the grounds of conduct. The only “politicized” *Social Register* is that of Washington, D.C., which automatically lists the President, all United States Senators (but not Representatives), etc.

<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Francis Bowen (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945), II, 215–16.

the President is. By the same token every enlisted man knows who is an officer. Where he will be punished for not knowing, it is no longer a "social" distinction. By contrast, practically no one knows who the leaders of "Society" are except those who are actually in it. There is, thus, no need for mutual agreement about the precise standards of social status except within a class and those classes adjacent to it. The bases of precise social distinctions within a circle, the things that are really esteemed and regarded as worthy of prestige, may not only be unknown but for all practical purposes be inconceivable to people in distant circles. What, for example, does a policeman in London know or even care about the relative social standing of the colleges in Oxford? What does an enlisted man think about the standing of an officer, as such, in the officers' club? Even servants can have, what are from their employer's point of view, very strange notions, indeed, about the social status of the family to which they are attached. Along these lines almost all the difficulties which have legitimately perplexed specialists in this area have arisen from the initial assumption of a unitary status hierarchy. As the theory of reference groups and research on them, among other things, has so abundantly confirmed, this cannot possibly exist in a large, complex society. What exists is a multiplicity of circles which are linked together by personal contacts and the mass media. The result of this is that from within the various circles there are different perspectives of the stratification system and, hence, different hierarchies.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to suggest that there are not broad areas of agreement upon standards within the society as a whole. Where agreement is genuinely clear cut and widespread, however, such as there is in the United States upon respect for the attributes of middle-class status, it will invariably be an aspect of the political order or of something

<sup>11</sup> W. Lloyd Warner, Marchia Meeker, and Kenneth Eells, *Social Class in America* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1949), p. 19.

which competes with government for its political functions.<sup>12</sup> Respect for these attributes, in other words, would not be so clear cut or widespread were they not publicly authoritative, if the middle class, that is, were not really the first-class citizens.

The methodological implication of the above is that the analysis of social stratification must be "repoliticized" in order to bring out its essential features.<sup>13</sup> Only by making the composition of that class which publicly and, hence, effectively sets the ruling standards in the society the focal point of analysis can one avoid one of the chief conceptual difficulties of much of stratification theory, namely, reified fragmentation of subgroups from the society as a whole. For example, to return to the question of minorities again, granted that they may to a great degree live in their own social worlds, have their own internal criteria of prestige, and altogether do not "fit" into the non-minority status hierarchy of the community as a whole, the fundamental fact still remains that middle-class members of such a minority, and, of course, the group as a whole when it becomes middle class, can make a political claim to be treated as first-class citizens, which completely breaks through the boundary of the community. The minority, in other words, becomes inte-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Churchill's remarks: "The East India Company's Army of Bengal had long been of ill-repute. Recruited mainly in the North, it was largely composed of high-caste Hindus. Brahmin privates would question the orders of officers and N.C.O.s of less exalted caste. Power and influence in the regiments frequently depended on a man's position in the religious rather than the military hierarchy. . . . This was bad for discipline" (Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-speaking Peoples* [London: Cassell, 1958], IV, 67).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der industriellen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1957), pp. 144-45, whose analysis points to similar conclusions. Cf. also in this respect the important words of caution of R. Bendix and S. M. Lipset against the danger of any approach which, by denying that political claims and interests may have a rational or reasonable ground, explains away the facts of political life ("Political Sociology," *Current Sociology*, VI, No. 2 [1957], 82-85).

grated or politically linked in the decisive respect to the main axis of the society which is obscured by regarding its social life as the basis of the exhaustive conceptual framework. All in all, one may say that only in the light of the authoritative character of the political order can the essentially private, ambiguous, and non-authoritative character of much of what takes place in the sphere of social class stratification be seen as such. Unless the latter is fitted into the more comprehensive conceptual framework, it becomes almost impossible to account, first, for the political weakness of upper social classes as classes and, second, for the fact that their very emphasis on status is a reaction to their loss of genuine authority.

The second aspect of social stratification concerns its political functions. These are to provide a sphere in which a group or class can arise and maintain itself as some type of intermediate authority in the society as a whole. This would be a class which, in spite of its lack of a ruling position, still has sufficient self-confidence, respect, and coherence openly to oppose the ruling standards set by the political order. Briefly, we examine three possible varieties of such authority.

The first type is that which exists in a capitalist democracy without a hereditary aristocracy, such as in the United States. There the members of the upper social classes as well as the clergy, educators, and those members of the professional classes in general who still have the bearing, the style of life, and the outlook of the older professional man, even though they must bow politically to the middle class, still can make a moral claim to be heard. On the one hand, there is considerable respect for these groups among the middle class as a whole by virtue of its religious heritage as well as the heritage of Western civilization in general. On the other hand, these groups, by virtue of the freedom they possess, accept the democracy in a way which they were not prepared to do in 1800 when the election of Jefferson appeared to them like the beginning of mob

rule.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it would be fair to say that they have forgotten that there ever was once such an issue. For both these reasons, even though they are not publicly authoritative on a national level in the same way in which they set the tone of eighteenth-century New England,<sup>15</sup> they cannot be simply dismissed. With the exception on the federal level of certain enclaves within the civil service, which in any event, as the attack by McCarthy showed, hardly have the coherence of the British civil service,<sup>16</sup> their sphere of influence has been the local community.<sup>17</sup> Much of this influence is the purely private power that wealth makes possible that can be exerted not only locally but nationally as well. With this we are not concerned in this analysis. What is of interest here is merely the extent to which they do wield influence and power that is not purely private but does have a moral foundation, that is to say, the extent to which they enjoy consent.<sup>18</sup> In general, one may offer the provisional hypothesis that, the larger the city, the less authoritative will these groups be in any issue that involves a conflict about a democratization, such as, for example, on the lowering of school standards. In these respects such groups have their greatest influence in the smaller suburban communities, where the dominant tone is set by the upper middle class.

A second type of such power is that which existed in prewar France and Germany, where the upper classes which had been displaced from power by a democratization, and inflamed furthermore by ideological cleavages, never fully accepted the parliamentary regimes. From their positions in the civil service and more particularly in

<sup>14</sup> Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Great Seal Books, 1955), pp. 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> R. N. Spann, "Civil Servants in Washington," *Political Studies*, Vol. I, Nos. 2 and 3 (1953), 143-61 and 228-45.

<sup>17</sup> E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> See above, n. 4.



the army, they exerted what power they possessed to destroy these regimes.<sup>19</sup>

A third type is that which exists in a totalitarian society. In view of the absence of freedom, it is more a potential than a normal feature of the society. What is of interest in the present context is the way in which groups, such as the economic managers in Soviet Russia, can develop an esprit de corps and certain non-ideological standards of political behavior oriented toward administrative, technical expertise. As such, these conflict with the methods of the autocratic dictatorship, which, relying for its support upon the ideological party, prefers such demagogic techniques as the "crash

<sup>19</sup> Luethy, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

drive" to raise production levels in industry. Though these groups can become influential when the autocracy is weakened, their political strength relative to that of the party politicians is indicated by the triumph of Khrushchev, the party leader, over Malenkov, who sought a base of support in the more educated, professional bureaucracy. Nonetheless, the general problem of whether such groups can exert influence within the regime promises to be one of the most interesting lines of research about stratification in totalitarian societies.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Myron Rush's penetrating analysis of the tension between the party and the state bureaucracy in Russia in "The Economic Managers," *New Leader*, April 11, 1958.