Why is there Social Stratification?: Crash Course Sociology #22

Crash Course: Sociology
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If you asked a medieval peasant whether they liked working two days a week for their lord while they barely made enough food for themselves, they'd probably say no. And if you ask a factory worker today whether they like making a tiny fraction of what their company's CEO makes, they'd probably have a similar answer. But even though huge numbers of people don't want inequality, it still exists, and it has for a long time. And the systems of stratification that we talked about last week don't really help explain this. They can tell us about how this inequality happens, but they can't tell us why. If you want to answer that question, we'll have to return, once again, to our old friends, the three sociological paradigms: structural functionalism, social conflict theory, and symbolic-interactionism.

[Theme Music]

Let's start with clarifying something pretty important about how sociologists understand inequality: even if the peasant and the factory worker both dislike the inequality in their lives, they might still believe that it's fair. The peasant might say that it's simply their place in the world to toil for their lord, and the factory worker might say that the CEO surely deserves his wealth. And this happens because of their societies' ideology.

For our purposes, an ideology is a set of cultural beliefs and values that justify a particular way of organizing society. Ideology also includes strongly held beliefs about a society's patterns of inequality. Ideology can help explain why inequality never goes away, but it doesn't on its own explain why we have unequal societies in the first place. For that we have to turn to our three paradigms.

From a structural functionalist perspective, we have social stratification because... well, you know, the basic story of structural functionalism by now, so say it along with me: we have stratification because it's functional for society. This is the basic argument of what's known as the Davis-Moore thesis. Put forward in 1945 by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, it argues that society assigns greater economic and social rewards to those jobs that are most important to the society.

This guarantees that difficult jobs will be filled, the thinking goes, and will draw people away from easier and less important work. So the more important a job is for the power functioning of a society, the more a society rewards it which promotes the effective functioning of that society-and also a system of social stratification.

Davis and Moore basically argue that, without unequal rewards, few people would want the jobs that require the years of training or personal sacrifice that typically come along with long work hours. Think medical doctor. Without the unequal rewards to motivate people, we'd have a lot of lifeguards sunning themselves on the beach and not very many ER docs.

But there are some serious problems with this idea. To begin with, Davis and Moore don't talk about how their thesis actually works in society, they only talk about why inequality might be functionally useful. And this leads to another problem: not all jobs that are important are necessarily hard to learn, or come with high pay. Garbage collecting, for instance, is extremely important for the smooth functioning of society but it's not a particularly high-paid, socially valued job. And this mismatch works the other way too: not all highly paid jobs are functionally important. For instance, ask yourself who is more functional for society: a high-school teacher or a famous actor? Now think about who gets paid more.

Finally Davis and Moore also ignore the fact that not all paths are equally open to all people. If inequality is functional for society because it motivates hard work, then society should reflect this by being meritocratic-a society in which everyone can work hard and get ahead. But as we've already seen, this is not the social reality. The structural nature of inequality, or the ways in which a society is organized to the advantage some groups over others, can be a cause of individual success or failure, no matter how hard a person works.

Now, while Davis and Moore don't really deal with the impact of inequality, social-conflict theory very much does. For Karl Marx, stratification is based on different relations to the means of production. At the simplest level, one class controls the means of production which allows them to extract labor from the other class, which controls only their own labor.

Marx believed that as capitalism progressed, the inequality between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat would get worse until eventually the proletariat would unite and overthrow the bourgeoisie. And in doing that, he though, they'd ultimately derail the whole capitalist system and all the inequality that came with it.

But one of the central criticisms of the social-conflict understanding of stratification is that the proletariat revolution never happened in western Europe or the United States. If inequality was so bad for workers, why did the revolution not happen? Well, German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf argued that Marx wasn't wrong about conflict per se, but he saw that the conflict Marx observed had changed in several ways that prevented revolution from happening.

First, Dahrendorf said, the capitalist class in Europe has been too fragmented to serve as a single target for revolutionaries. Rather than having just a few capitalists against an ever increasing proletariat, we actually have more capitalists of different kinds: business owners and executives and people who own stocks. More and more people are invested in capitalism as an economic system. And a fragmented capitalist class makes it difficult for workers to focus their revolutionary energies on any one group.

In addition, he argued, greater worker organization in the form of unions has allowed workers to fight for better working conditions, higher pay, and greater control over their labor resulting in an increased standard of living. Greater legal protections for workers, like worker's compensation, unemployment insurance, and Social Security have also worked to prevent the revolution that Marx predicted. All of these structural changes, in turn, helped lead to greater job stability, which makes workers less likely to push for revolutionary change.

But Dahrendorf saw that the ideology of capitalism plays a role here as well. Just as more people are financially invested in capitalism, people are also ideologically invested in it. But this isn't just a matter of whether people like the system or not. Ideology determines what people see as available to struggle over. Fighting for higher wages seems reasonable, but abolishing wage labor does not.

There are more criticisms of Marx than just an absent revolution, and one of the more fundamental ones was made by none other than Max Weber. Specifcally, Weber argued that Marx's focus on economic stratification was too simplistic.

Weber pointed out that there are other kinds of conflicts to consider. Weber argued that stratification actually occurs along three dimensions: economic class, social status and social power, or what sociologists refer to as socioeconomic status. This view adds more complexity and nuance to the matter of stratification, but as with the structural functionalist approach, it's focused only on the macro perspective.

Marx's theory, for example, is all about the long historical arc of class conflict, but it doesn't really tell us what that looks like in everyday life. For a more micro or individual-level view of inequality,

sociologists turn to symbolic-interactionism.

When we first defined social stratification, we said that it involved putting people into categories. Symbolic-interactionism lets you us understand how this actually works because, sure, what class you're in might come down to how much money you make but how can other people tell what class it is in everyday interaction? It's not like people walk around with signs. Except that they kind of do, in the form of conspicuous consumption. This is when the products that you buy make statements about your social position.

Buying a really nice bottle of wine for a dinner party or wearing designer sunglasses isn't just about the things itself, it's also about sending a message to anyone who sees it-a message that says, "I'm in the upper class." The objects act as sign vehicles, carrying meaning just like a written word. To some degree, all consumption is conspicuous consumption. Your tastes are shaped by your social position, and you use them to define yourself just as others read your tastes to judge you and your position. To see how this works, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Imagine you're driving in your car with an acquaintance, and you want to put on some music. The music you choose tells them something about you. Let's say you put on some really esoteric classical music. Obviously this tells your friends that you like it and hopefully that you think they'll like it too. But it also tells them that you are the kind of person who likes esoteric classical music.

Now if it's not obvious what this has to do with stratification, think about the assumptions that your acquaintance is gonna make about you: that you come from a particular background, one that's allowed you to have access to a certain kind of education and upbringing, or that you've had years of music lessons. They might readily assume that you're the kind of person whose class standing allows them to develop these musical tastes. To be clear, I'm not saying these judgments are true. Lots of people who like classical music are not, say, wealthy or well-educated. I'm saying that assumptions like these tend to be widely held, and recognized.

So when you put on your music, your friend might recognize you as a person like them, if they share your tastes. Or maybe they don't recognize you as being like them, so they judge you for being pretentious. And this isn't because classical music is special somehow; it's true regardless of what kind of music you put on, and applies just as much to the clothes you wear, the books you read, and all of your other tastes. These are all ways in which people categorize you in the hierarchy of stratification. They're the signs you carry around that tell people where you fit in the society and how to interact with you. Thanks Thought Bubble.

This kind of judgment and mutual recognition isn't a minor thing. It's a powerful force for stratification. For instance, it can be extremely important in getting a job. Hiring can often be an exercise in this kind of judgment, as managers look for people who "fit the culture" and will get along with the rest of the team. And it's not just about what you like, it's also about how you like it. If you decide to start telling people that you like opera because you want to seem upper class, but then you show up to a performance in a T-shirt and flip-flops, you're probably not gonna get anywhere.

There's a ton of background knowledge and understanding behind tastes and preferences that you can't just conjure out of nowhere, and the difficulty of acquiring this knowledge helps maintain stratification. So these three perspectives: structural-functionalism, social-conflict, and symbolic-interactionism can help us better understand not just how stratification works, but why we have it.

Today we learned about different theories of stratification. We talked ideology and how it helps stratification reproduce itself. We discussed structural-functionalism with the Davis-Moore thesis, and its problems. We talked about Marx's understanding of classes and Weber's criticisms. And we saw how symbolic-interactionism helps explain stratification in everyday life.

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