

How Social Classes Shape Our Lives: A Simple Review of Inequality Studies

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the relationship of social class with the lives of people through appraisal of the leading findings of the studies of inequality in the economic, educational, health and social sector. It is based on classical theories (Marx, Weber) and modern theories (Bourdieu, intersectionality) and describes the process of how the notion of class acts structurally as a force and culturally as a form of identity which is extremely widespread in everyday life. The review points at economic inequalities, unequal access to quality education and healthcare, and residential segregation as elementary to class reproduction of the benefits and drawbacks across generations. It also looks at processes of class reproduction e.g., through cultural capital, institutional discrimination and limited social mobility. Comparative approaches can indicate the extent to which the outcomes of class inequality are mediated through the national and regional contexts, demonstrating that policy and social safety nets can play an important role in policing the outcomes. Besides the continuous obstacles, the paper has considered resistance movements, educational advocacy, and collective action in opposing the oppression of classes. To identify the way social class operates as an organizing principle of inequality will hopefully be the theme of this review in a form that is lucid and accessible. It points to the significance of venturing into the issue of class in the context of large-scale social justice, equality, and transformation by combining theoretical knowledge with evidence-based practices. The paper ends with pointing out avenues of future research that can be based on integrated and international perspectives of class.

Keywords: Social Class, Inequality, Cultural Capital, Social Mobility, Structural Inequity.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

A system of stratification based on accesses to resources like wealth, education and occupation is termed social class. It is a major organizing concept in the society and determines the way individuals derive opportunity, power and privilege. There is a historical context of class structure in economics systems, political ideas and social relations. There are modified theoretical ideas on class. Karl Marx has stressed that the key factor in the development of the society is the struggle of classes: the bourgeoisie (owner) and the proletariats (labourer). These dimensions were extended by Max Weber who added status and power dimensions to the art of defining class since economic position does not comprise all the elements of class but also the position of social prestige and political influence. Modern theories are based on these ideas and extend them to examine the interaction of class with identity, culture and institutional power.

B. Significance of the Study

- Identifies structural inequality: Social class is a way of realizing the structural basis to inequality that exists among masses in the society.
- Presents an explanation of unequal outcomes: The existence of class differences explains the persistence of inequalities in education, income, health and life opportunities.

- Brings privilege and unfavourable: It gives insight into how some groups enjoy benefits of unearned privilege and others some barriers.
- Social policy: Class analysis provides fundamental information in the designing of effective and fair policies that counter inequality.
- Enriches sociological knowledge: It expands the comprehension of how identity, position, and power coincide in the societal institutions.

C. Objectives and scope

- Make complicated studies easy: Provide easy and understandable overview of major studies on class and inequality to generality and academia readers.
- Concentrate on practice: Pay attention to the experiences of people who lived in the reality of the social differences between classes.
- Structural mechanisms analysis: Analyze how over time inequality is reproduced by institutions and systems.
- Bring in comparative views: See how social class operates in other nations, or situations.
- Bridge theory and practice: Bridge between foundational theories and the present-day empirical knowledge as a way of informing advocacy and reform.

II. THEORETICAL THOUGHTS BEHIND SOCIAL CLASS

A. Classic Theories

This paper shall start by discussing initial theories which exemplify the study of social class. Karl Marx conceived of class as relation to the means of production, which conceived the society into two key groups of entities comprising the bourgeoisie, who own and govern the means of production, and the proletariat who claim their right to sell their labor. Marx maintained that social change is motivated by the class struggle between these two constituencies; especially in capitalism where the main problems are domination and charge of the working classes. A more elaborate view was provided by Max Weber where he presented the idea of a class, status, and party. He did not ignore the aspect of economy classes although he further put into consideration that the aspects of social status (prestige) and political power (party affiliation) also create social stratification. Therefore, inequality is not related to ownership, only but to the way of life, power, and influence.

B. Modern Theories

Contemporary sociologists have gone further to elucidate on classical thoughts and give rise to the intricacies of class. Pierre Bourdieu came up with non-economic aspects of capital as the key determinants of class position: social capital (networks and relationships) and cultural capital (knowledge, tastes and education). It can be defined by his theory, according to which the reproduction of the class happens through the subtle means of habits, language, and schooling. Erik Olin Wright further developed Marxist thought by describing "contradictory class locations" — individuals who may occupy intermediate or overlapping positions, such as managers. Furthermore, intersectionality has taken the stage as an important framework with an understanding that there should be no understanding of just a single factor (class, in this case). Rather, it overlaps with race, gender, sexuality and other identities and forms compounded privileges or compounded forms of oppression. The theories combined help to provide a complex picture of the mechanism of operation of class in society and the lives of individuals.

III. THE MEANING OF DIMENSION OF INEQUALITY IS DEFINED IN TERMS OF WHAT CANNOT BE DONE.

A. Economic disparity

Class-based stratification is characterized by economic inequality. It takes the form of unequal distribution of income, large disparities in the wealth, and the division of labour market. Those with high income tend to amass wealth and property whereas those in low income find it hard to acquire the necessities. This gap has been enhanced due to globalization of the world following increased concentration of profits in capital intensive industries, a trend coupled with outsourcing and increased automation in jobs that allow working

class to have more precarious employment. The economic vulnerability increases due to the existence of many low paying jobs with windiness of job position and poor practices with poor workers unable to move up.

B. Educational inequality

Education is one of the most important sources of social mobility, but access to and quality is greatly determined by class. Children who belong to upper-middle classes are frequently placed in schools with larger funding, receive parental help in studying, and can more easily access such services as tutoring and extracurricular activities. Conversely, working-class students are confronted with overcrowded classrooms, under equipped schools and institutional hindrances towards higher education. Such inequality leads to poor performance in education, as well as to fewer opportunities to succeed in the social sphere.

C. Health and wellbeing

The health outcomes are tightly integrated with class position. Largely, people in lower socioeconomic classes have shorter lifespans, more chronic diseases and less access to care. These inequalities are associated with structural causes that include food deserts and inferior housing. Further, low-income communities have a higher risk of being exposed to environmental injustice due to living close to pollution distributing places or working at poorly controlled workplaces.

D. Housing or Neighbourhoods Effects

Social inequality is reflected in housing inequality which in turn compounds social classes. Well-to-do families can live in safe and stable communities with good-performing schools and plentiful services whereas households with lesser income tend to experience residential segregation and unaffordable rent and housing insecurity. Housing is a primary predictor of inequality because the socioeconomic composition of a neighbourhood has a strong impact on the education fate of the neighbourhood and its occupants as well as downplaying employment opportunities and a good life.

IV. Class Reproduction on Mechanisms

Class reproduction does not just occur via the economy however it also occurs through cultural and institutional processes by perpetuating inequality generation after generation. Concept of cultural capital and habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu describes how the norms of the middle and high classes are established in society through the social institutions such as school and workplace. The cultural capital, i.e., the style of language, cultural preferences, and manners generally correspond to what dominant institutions expect, thus conferring a clear benefit on privileged individuals. The rich families tend to socialize their children into these norms at an early stage of life, this makes it easy to fit in academics and workplace life. Such distribution of benefit seems natural; however, it is a potent tool that helps to seek division between the classes.

Meanwhile, institutional obstacles contribute largely to inequality maintenance. The working-class and marginalized people are particularly underrepresented in education systems, employment practices, and criminal justice policies, all of which are left open to discriminatory practices. To give a couple of examples, low-income schools are inadequately funded and underperforming, thereby depriving their students of educational opportunities, and employment patterns tend to discriminate in favour of hiring candidates with elite credentials or social contacts. Moreover, the policies often favor the rich, who can use their social privileges to get tax exemptions, or, simply lack access to the affordable healthcare. The combination of cultural norms and institutional structures will manifest itself as a highly resistant system that helps to ensure class hierarchies regardless of the generations.

V. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

The issue of inequality as a factor of class needs to be examined through the prospect of its expression in various national as well as regional contexts. Cross-national differences present a big disparity between the mores of intensity and manifestation of class division. As an example, the United States is inclined towards the presence of high rate of inequality of income and wealth and little social protection of universal services such as medical care and education. Conversely, the Nordic nations such as Sweden and Norway are typified by the presence of a strong welfare state and a robust redistributive policy system that decreases poverty and

increases social mobility. These countries rely more on the provision of the services of most of the population and there is greater access to good education and improved healthcare, which reduces the gap between the classes. The United Kingdom is another good case of disparities between classes where education and occupation depend on them, regardless of welfare activities. India has a special aspect of class that is being mixed up with caste, rural-urban differences, and economic liberalization, constituting multiple levels of inequalities that are influenced by both tradition and modern capitalism.

Class is also experienced about geographic context. The performance of class is quite different in the urban and in the countryside. Class divisions can be expressed in terms of occupational status, residential patterns and access to high status schools in urban settings. Cities provide more opportunities, yet they see a high contrast between prosperity and poverty, mostly in slums or underprivileged quarters. In rural countryside, however, class may be manifested in other ways- land possession, farming activity and lack of services and infrastructure. Class disadvantage is often accompanied by sections that are economically stagnant (and immobile). The comparison of these two situations brings out the significance of policy, geography and culture on experiences of classes around the world.

VI. THE MOBILITY AND THE INABILITY TO MOVE UP

A. Inter-generational Mobility

The promise of mobility across the social hierarchy between generations the possibility of moving up or down in the class structure is a favourite subject of celebration in the societies of affluence. More specifically, the idea of the so-called American Dream states, that success can be achieved by every person despite his or her background, through hard work and determination. Yet, the studies reveal the lack of intergenerational mobility, particularly in the highly unequal societies, such as the United States. Children of poor people have a lower rate of gaining elevated income groups in their adulthood. This is explained as sticky floors of the poor who cannot get up and sticky ceilings of the rich who are assured of their benefits, even in later generations. These patterns have their reinforcements with education, family wealth and social networks.

B. Structural constraints

Structures usually trump hard work; even though, individual effort is critical. Due to unequal access to quality education, healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities it becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, which is not easy to break. The disadvantaged can be just as industrious as those who are better off but as there are long-term aspects of the system acting against the disadvantaged, their results are curtailed. This puts the idea of pure meritocracy, in which talent and hard work define success, into question. Meritocracy as an ideal may in practice be a myth which allows structural inequality to be hidden by blaming it on individuals and not solving the underlying problems in society. It is important to recognize these constraints as a way of developing policies and interventions that advance mobility and equal opportunity.

VII. RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

Besides the fact that inequality always existed in the form of different classes, there is also a history of persistent actions that endeavoured to change and contest the social order. Labour movements and labour solidarity have been effective instruments in curbing economic exploitation and promotion of labour rights. With unionization, employees have struggled to ensure better wage rates, safer working environment and improved job securities. The need to mobilize the masses and put pressure on husbands and the government has seen strikes and grassroots campaigns ranging between walk outs in factories to world-wide campaigns on living wages. These movements do not only enhance material conditions but also establish cooperation and strength amongst the marginalized groups.

Besides direct action, education and advocacy are of importance in exposing and dealing with class inequality. Critical pedagogy developed as an approach by authors such as Paulo Freire to get learners to challenge the systems of oppression and to find themselves as agents of their own interests in their quest of justice. Working-class space in education and the advocacy of understanding the social foundations can give people the means to question inequality on an intellectual and practical level. Public scholarship is common; that is, accessible research, media debt, and community education assists in closing the academic-to-real-world activism gap.

All these facilitate the formative of a critical consciousness as well as enable the communities to assert change. Labor activism and transformative education are therefore indispensable tactics in the fight against the oppression of classes towards the desired more equal societal structure.

VIII. CONCLUSION

A. Overview of the Most Critical Findings

This review has revealed that social class considerably influences life chances of people in many aspects such as income, education, health, housing, and mobility among others. Using both the classical and contemporary theories under consideration it is seen that class means structural location, as well as a practical experience. The processes of inequality, entailing economic inequalities, reproduction of culture, institutional inequality, and geographical inequality interferes to strengthen the wellness of some and the trouncing of others. Comparative and intersectional analyses also help to understand how class is co-related with other social identities or how the class is applicable in different contexts across the world.

B. Implications

These data reveal an essential structural change that should take place. The problem of inequality based on classes cannot be solved on an individual level but must be addressed through policymaking which focuses on a more conversant access to schooling, healthcare, jobs and shelter. States and organizations should address the institutionalized existence of class-based boundaries and adopt redistributive tools, including progressive taxation, extensive social amenities, and job security to establish fairer societies.

C. Future Directions

Although existing research develops useful information, there are several gaps. The relation of the class with race, gender, and migration status as well as the experience of class in the Global South requires further research. Existing literature ought to be left behind by future research that can take an intersectional and global approach to foster knowledge and suggest area-specific solutions. Moreover, continuous contact with communities, activists, and educators may assist in making sure that academic learning can take place in the actual world and produce change in the struggle against the inequality.

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