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ABSTRACT

Designed for use as supplementary instructional material in a cultural anthropology course, this learning module introduces students to the basic concepts of social stratification, one of the more controversial areas of contemporary social theory. An overview is provided of the explanations that have been put forth by social philosophers for stratification. Traits influencing social stratification are discussed including population size, level of technology, and mode of economic adaptation. Religious arguments for social stratification are juxtaposed with Marx's theory of the dialectic of materialism. Marxist concepts of conflict analysis, bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, proletariat, and lumpenproletariat are defined and discussed. Aspects of class conflict, models of social class, and influences on social mobility are also examined. Finally, performance activities covering the module's content are presented. (EJV)

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Social Stratification

A Modular Approach

Cultural Anthropology
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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Introduction:

This module has been prepared as a guide to a specific area within Cultural Anthropology. Your task will be to read the materials, perform the tasks at the end of the module, and to cross check your answers with the information in the module upon completion of the performance activities. It will be your responsibility to keep up with the reading assignments in the textbook, and to take lecture notes,and film notes.

The module is designed to give you a basis for mastering a specific amount of information, and has been field tested with over 1000 students who have demonstrated by their performance on examinations, that the modular approach can increase the probability of student mastery. The theoretical perspective which is employed is based upon cognitive psychology, gestalt psychology, behaviorism and programmed learning.

Social Stratification is an area that is frequently overlooked within anthropological literature. It has been emphasized by sociologists, primarily because the latter tend to work in societies which exhibit a greater degree of stratification. However, introductory students of anthropology should become aware of the conceptual approaches toward social stratification, given the reality of present day anthropological fieldwork taking place in developing or Third World Areas. Those anthropologists who have studied societies which are organized at a more complex level of political organization than the band structure, also encounter social stratification. Social stratification, and the explanations for its existance in societies, are still the topic of heated debate both within and outside the confines of academia.

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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION is one of the more controversial areas of contemporary social theory. The concept implies that a society can be divided into recognizable hierarchical categories wherein members are grouped in terms of lifestyle and privilege according to a ranking system. Although there are seemingly endless ways in which people can be assigned a relative position or degree of status in any graded group, social stratification is based upon proximity to the vested interest and privileged position of a power elite.

Social philosophers have advanced a variety of explanations for stratification. During the 19th Century, it was fashionable to view less complex cultures as being free of social class divisions. Such cultures were often labeled as EGALITARIAN; some philosophers even equated an ideal egalitarian state with the "original innocent nature of man." Although many primitive cultures were more democratic than the culturally intricate societies of Western Europe, as more ethnographic information about various primitive cultures was gathered, it became clear that not all were egalitarian, classless societies, and that a significant degree of stratification was present in numerous non-Western cultures. Marxism, socialism and other major 19th century philosophical and political movements which challenged the validity of traditional institutions and class divisions evolved from

the attraction of democratic social philosophers to egalitarian models.

A variety of traits influence stratification: among the most important are population size, level of technology, and mode of economic adaptation. A comparison of hunting and gathering cultures with horticultural societies reveals that the former tended to have far less stratification. A shift to cultivation carried a corresponding increase in stratification, as new technologies were developed the ability to support larger population groups increased, and new divisions of labor were required. Food production via cultivation changed many aspects of social behavior. Whereas in a hunting and gathering culture most members performed essentially the same survival tasks, horticulture created a situation in which a variety of specialized tasks had to be performed. Consequently, some forms of labor were valued more highly than others. The CALORIC ENERGY obtained by hunting and gathering was much less than the caloric energy produced by cultivation. There were few large hunting and gathering societies because the economic style and habitat could not support a large concentration of people. With horticultural technology came the ability to generate and store surplus food, as more caloric energy was produced than was immediately needed for survival. A larger population was therefore possible, and a large labor force was needed. From the resultant new divisions of labor emerged a specialized leadership strata whose members assumed responsibility

in matters relating to control and usage of the means of production.

The FUNCTIONALIST approach to anthropology emphasizes the roles institutions fill in societies. Religious dogma and divine order are among the many rationales developed to explain the increased social stratification which accompanied the evolution from hunting and gathering to horticulture. It is highly probable that as populations increased and dependence upon cultivated food expanded, people became uneasy about the weather, seasons, and other forces of nature that affected the food supply. Diseases, injuries, famine, drought, floods, fires and other events had a profound physical and psychological impact upon the culture. The need to understand and control nature and the food supply was of paramount concern. Religious institutions developed in which a combination of rituals were used to create a sense of order and to allay the fear and anxiety that were a part of the subjective reality of the horticultural society. The use of rituals allowed sacred ritual experts to guide and control the populace through demonstrations of their knowledge and power over nature.

The political power and status of ritual leaders increased as technology and specialized information created the potential for more complex modes of living and social interaction. Ritual specialists were able to foster concrete class divisions between themselves and the masses who toiled to support the population. These specialists in some

groups crystalized their positions by attaching an ASCRIBED STATUS to their role. This excluded the participation of those who were outside their kindred or ritual group. Thus a distinction was formalized between the common people and the leaders who controlled secular and sacred activities. In some societies, power could be achieved by performing specific acts. The elite began to recognize social mobility as a danger to their own status, and gradually closed most avenues for upward mobility, thereby denying most group members access to power.

The division of society into distinctly stratified groups was generally explained as the result of some form of "supernatural" or "divine" intervention. To question the hierarchy was to question the very essence of the spiritual or cosmological foundations of the culture. In many societies, the leaders and ritual specialists managed to inculcate the extreme importance of their own positions via myth, legend and ritual. Portents of impending doom, plus social sanctions, were used to maintain control and prevent effective protests or inquiries. The meshing of ritual and leadership roles flourished.

> If the supernatural world governs the destinies of men more ultimately than does the real world, its earthly representative, the person through whom one may communicate with the supernatural, must be a powerful individual. He is a keeper of sacred tradition, a skilled performer of the ritual, and an interpreter of lore and myth. He is in such close contact with the gods that he is viewed as possessing some of their characteristics.
>
> The priest can never be free from competition, since the criteria of whether or not one has genuine contact with the supernatural are never strictly clear. It is this

competition that debases the priestly position below what might be expected at first glance. That is why priestly prestige is highest in those societies where membership in the profession is rigidly controlled by the priestly guild itself. That is why, in part at least, elaborate devices are utilized to stress the identification of the person with his office--spectacular costume, abnormal conduct, special diet, segregated residence, celibacy, conspicuous leisure, and the like. In fact, the priest is always in danger of becoming somewhat discredited--as happens in a secularized society--because in a world of stubborn fact, ritual and sacred knowledge alone will not grow crops or build houses. Furthermore, unless he is protected by a professional guild, the priest's identification with the supernatural tends to preclude his acquisition of abundant worldly goods.

As between one society and another it seems that the highest general position awarded the priest occurs in the medieval type of social order. Here there is enough economic production to afford a surplus, which can be used to support a numerous and highly organized priesthood; and yet the populace is unlettered and therefore credulous to a high degree. Perhaps the most extreme example is to be found in the Buddhism of Tibet, but others are encountered in the Catholicism of Feudal Europe, the Inca regime in Peru, the Brahminism of India, and the Mayan Priesthood of Yucatan. (Kingsley Davis, Wilbert Moore, American Sociological Review, Volume 10, April 1945, p. 245)

Karl Marx rejected religious arguments for social stratification, and stated that sacred ritual specialists had been the fundamental promoters of stratification. During the 19th Century, RELIGIOUS IDEALISM and dogma were often cited as verifying rationales for oppressive living and working conditions. Marx questioned the moral and empirical basis for such arguments, and substituted a DIALECTIC OF MATERIALISM to posit reasons for the evolution of classes, and to expose those whose interests were served by rigid stratification. According to Marx, stratification always serves best those who have positions of privilege. Marx saw that social inequities existed, and questioned the

continued exploitation of workers. He viewed religious idealism as an unhealthy institution, because people were too often asked to accept their oppressed status and class as being of divine ordination. He felt this was a repressive factor because it discouraged people from organizing to change their status. Marx's approach has been categorized as ATHEISTIC HUMANISM, a perspective based upon the hypothesis that the dignity and rights of an individual can only be preserved by assuring the dignity and rights of the larger social group.

A CONFLICT ANALYSIS of social stratification is based on the premise that stratification can serve one person or group only at the expense of another person or group. This perspective is an acknowledgment that the struggle between classes for power can create tension among the various strata of a society, and interfere with the establishment of alliances between different oppressed classes. Marx predicted that people would eventually restructure the basic social order through the process of cultural revolution. He observed that unique characteristics and consciousness help solidify and unite the members of a particular class. Marx defined four basic social groups as they existed in 19th Century Europe: the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the lumpenproletariat.

The BOURGEOISIE is defined as the elite who control the major industrial complexes within a culture. Class cohesiveness within this group is perceived to result from

an awareness of privileged position. As a consequence, its members are in a position to retain power, and rely upon mutual support and identification to protect their differential of status and lifestyle. Members of the middle class, the small business owners, small farmers, small manufacturers, and other co-opted workers are considered to identify more with the oppressors than with the oppressed. Marx characterized members of the PETTY BOURGEOISIE as reactionary and opportunistic. He believed that if by chance they joined the proletariat in revolution, their basic motivation would be self-interest. The label PROLETARIAT was applied to the largest social class of the 19th Century. Although the definition of this class has been modified during the ensuing years, it generally is used to include the workers within a society. Marx believed that as workers were confronted with diminishing control over the means of production and the distribution of goods, services and money, they would develop increased awareness of their alienation and oppression, and that a new political movement would emerge as a consequence.

Marx mistrusted the LUMPENPROLETARIAT, the "dangerous class" composed of the "passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society." He theorized that if included in the revolution, the lumpenproletariat would be "prepared more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue." It is unclear exactly who the members of this class are. Some interpreters of Marxist theory declare that

the violent and predatory criminal elements of society belong to this group; others believe that the chronically unemployed constitute this group. A third explanation is that oppression creates a class of people who are so immersed in self-interest and basic survival that they are unable to work toward a common purpose. Marx was wary of the conflicting needs of the lumpenproletariat, and of the consequent danger to successful revolution. He viewed their purpose in the social strata as a counterbalance to the proletariat, emphasizing that the presence and size of this class serves to discourage workers from challenging the status quo, lest the vast numbers of unemployed and disadvantaged persons displace the proletariat from their jobs, rather than joining them in revolution. A number of contemporary economists and social philosophers have advanced the theory that in capitalist countries unemployment is kept artificially high to preserve this threat of competition for the jobs of the proletariat.

The categories Marx created are still used as classifications, although some changes in status and role within the four groups have occurred. Based on a world model, his taxonomy is generally accurate. However, when specific cultures and economic modes are compared, contradictions appear. Thus a member of the proletariat in one society may be viewed as a member of the petty bourgeoisie or even the bourgeoisie when a worldwide perspective and classification is made. Application of the Marxist model on a worldwide

basis demonstrates that much of the world's population toils to maintain a high standard of living for relatively few people. The prospect of these masses continuing to toil for eternity in perpetuation of such economic disparity lessens as modern technology makes information more accessible to larger numbers of workers. It is one thing to labor in ignorance, and quite another to become aware via the media of how one's labor is being used to advantage by others. It is conceivable that confrontations between the affluent and the poor will increase both nationally and internationally.

Technology has given even the smallest countries potential access to biological, chemical and sometimes even nuclear weaponry should such conflict arise. The potential for continued class struggle will increase as the differential in consumption rates between societies soar. The world's major consumers of raw materials, goods and services will be classified on the basis of their consumption and national political identities as the oppressors by a growing segment of the world's population.

The concept of CLASS CONFLICT was refined during the 19th Century to include material from the biological sciences. A desire to attain a more scientific approach toward the analysis of human behavior led a number of social philosophers to construct models of the social world based upon the biological model of competition and struggle. Thus stratification was variously attributed to Social Darwinism, the capitalism-oriented theories of lineal evolution, and to the Marxist dialectic approach.

Marxists view the end result of the social struggle within nature as a conflict in which inequality will ultimately be cast aside as too injurious, and competition will be replaced by a cooperative, classless society. Most capitalists also view the world as being in a constant state of competition; however, they usually credit the power elite with having struggled through a self-validating process. The power which the elite control is attributed to the mechanism of natural selection. Marxists regard the argument as absurd. Conflict analysis views class oppression as the creation of a situation which can be altered once the masses recognize and exert their own power. One method commonly employed by the power elite is to create division and unrest among exploited classes. The hostility and aggression of various groups can then be effectively channeled away from the controlling group. Western anthropologists have become concerned with studying power and its function, and have begun to examine power relationships as cultural traits. Marx recognized the importance of power and used the concept as a key to expose social stratification.

Greater power, status and prestige are often awarded to those who perform tasks which are of extreme importance to a society. Acquired status and the formation of class strata are tied to the cultural complexity and level of technological specialization within a society. Personal achievement in many primitive cultures did not necessarily

result in the attainment of a differential of privilege or lifestyle. Although special achievement might be recognized, the need to cooperate and reinforce group solidarity was paramount, and traits which emphasized personal rather than group welfare were considered divisive and generally were not allowed to flourish. As societies evolved to more sophisticated levels, however, the need to organize an efficient work force and to have specialists increased. Social stratification allows tasks to be assigned and helps ensure the longevity of society.

Social class and social stratification are important concepts, and anthropologists must be familiar with the conceptual terms associated with each. The criteria by which a group is classified can be as broad or as narrow as the observer desires. Unfortunately, most ethnographers tend to minimize or neglect social stratification, considering the subject of class structure to be of secondary interest and importance. Tody the need to develop information about stratification has increased.

A SOCIAL CLASS is a group of individuals who share a common lifestyle. One method of analysis uses the multiple index approach. Standardized lists of specific traits are used to discover patterns and determine cross-cultural similarities and differences. Questionnaires designated to enumerate lifestyle traits are employed. The most commonly examined traits are education, income, housing, occupation, leisure activities, and types and numbers of material items.

This format is not always suited for examining primitive cultures. However, it could be modified to establish statistical correlations using roughly analogous if not identical categories. In agricultural and industrial cultures, the multiple index approach is a particularly valuable research technique.

Another type of analysis which is favored by some researchers utilizes the REPUTATIONAL APPROACH. Members of a group are asked to identify the class groupings which they see in their own society. The researcher examines the resulting data and attempts to find correlations and interpret the results. In some instances this method allows the observer to obtain a more accurate picture of social class, because it is based upon the knowledge and categories of the group being studied. There are many approaches to the study of stratification. One methodological technique commonly used by social anthropology involves PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION. The fieldworker attempts to record class patterns through actual participation and observation. Insight gained in this fashion is helpful in developing a profile of the group. The trend in contemporary social anthropology is to utilize a combination of statistical, reputational and participant observation techniques.

Social class is more than an abstract concept, it is the institutional sub-cultural complex in which most of the learning required for survival takes place. Class socialization and enculturation prepares individuals for

life within the group. It can also limit opportunities for interaction outside one's subculture or class. Class divisions take on the distinction of subcultures in that almost all aspects of daily life are influenced by social class membership. Marriage type, family size, sex role alternatives, sexual behavior, education, occupation, leisure interests, temporal perception, levels of violence, clothing, speech patterns, life expectancy, infant mortality, mother mortality, suicide rate, mental illness rate, and arrest rate, as well as many other traits, are directly influenced by social class.

If one utilizes the conflict model, it becomes clear that group members do not participate equally. Because of the controls of powerful groups, the significance of class isolation and status differential becomes more important. The culturally isolated position of some classes prevents social mobility. Individuals find it exceedingly hard to modify the behaviors they have learned as members of a particular class. The powerful members of a society may foster antagonism between classes as a mechanism whereby the pent-up hostility and energy of the exploited classes can be channeled away from the power elite. The obvious implication is that class conflict is acknowledged by the elite, and is skillfully manipulated to direct pressure away from themselves, toward the other competing classes.

In some circumstances it is possible to change

relative class position through achievement. SOCIAL MOBILITY is usually divided into several categories. HORIZONTAL MOBILITY involves lateral movement outside a social class. VERTICAL MOBILITY relates to movement between social classes. In an OPEN CLASS society, both types of mobility are possible, and are obtained through achievement. In a CLOSED CLASS, mobility is restricted and is primarily ascribed. The extreme form of a closed class system is the CASTE SYSTEM, in which all social class positions are ascribed, i.e., handed down intact from one generation to another. There is no possibility of movement outside a caste; no one can ever change his or her caste position. The economic and ritual aspects of the culture reinforce caste distinctions. Economic roles are ascribed to various segments within the society, and ritual interpretation is used to justify the ascribed positions. The caste exists for one purpose: to insure and transmit a favored position for the power elite.

Class systems exist in most societies; however, the complexity of stratification appears to increase with the evolutionary complexity of a society. A few scholars have argued that social stratification in its more extreme form contributes to the eventual decline of a society. The intellectual and talent pool within a heavily stratified society tends to become insular or incestuous. It lacks new insights or novel ways of overcoming problems. Tradition and the continuation of the status quo outweigh new

techniques for overcoming problems. Carried to an extreme, such a society sows the seeds of its own destruction by becoming overspecialized.

Performance Activities

Please fill in the blanks:

1. Social S_____ is one of the more controversial areas of contemporary social theory.

2. Cultures which were thought to be free of social class divisions were termed E_____.

3. A F_____ approach to anthropology emphasizes the roles institutions fill in societies.

4. Crystalization of power was sometimes encouraged through the use of an A_____ S_____ for ritual specialists.

5. M_____ postulated an explanation for social class based upon logic and reason as contrasted to a "divine origin" for social stratification.

6. D_____ M_____ is the name for the philosophical approach which explained social class from a Marxist perspective.

7. A_____ humanism has been used as a descriptive metaphor for a Marxist approach.

8. Conflict A_____ of social stratification is based on the premise that stratification can serve one person or group only at the expense of another person or group.

9. Members of the middle class were classified as P_____ B_____.

10. Members of the elite were called the B_____.

11. Members of the working class were termed the P_____.

12. Members of the "rotting layers" were called the L_____.

13. The concept of C_____ conflict was refined during the 19th Century.

14. A social C_____ is a group of individuals who share a common lifestyle.

15. The R_____ approach utilizes the perceptions of societal members to identify class positions.

16. P_____ observation is a technique which is commonly used in social anthropology.

17. Social M_____ is usually divided into several categories.

18. H_____ mobility involves lateral movement within a class.

19. V_____ mobility involves movement up and down and between social classes.

20. An O_____ class society allows both types of mobility.

21. A C_____ class society restricts mobility.

22. A C_____ system is an extreme form of crystalized class positioning.

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