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On the Origin of Inequality among Men

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Even in the affluent society, it remains a stubborn and remarkable fact that men are unequally placed. There are children who are ashamed of their parents because they think that a university degree has made them 'better'. There are people who decorate their houses with antennas without having the television sets to go with them, in order to convince their neighbors that they can afford television. There are firms that build their offices with movable walls because the status of their employees is measured in square feet and an office has to be enlarged when its occupant is promoted. There are clerical workers whose ambition it is to achieve a position in which they not only can afford, but are socially permitted to own, a two-tone car. Of course, such differences are no longer directly sustained by the force of legal sanction, which upholds the system of privilege in a caste or estate society. Nevertheless, our society – quite apart from the cruder gradations of property and income, prestige and power – is characterized by a multitude of differences of rank so subtle and yet so penetrating that one cannot but be skeptical of the claim one sometimes hears that a leveling process has caused all inequalities to disappear. It is no longer usual to investigate the anxiety, suffering and hardship that inequalities cause among men – yet there are suicides because of poor examination results, divorces based on 'social' incompatibility, crimes occasioned by a feeling of social inequality. Throughout our society, social inequality is still turning men against men.

These remarks are not meant as a plea for equality. On the contrary, I shall later agree with Kant, who called 'inequality among men' a 'rich source of much that is evil, but also of everything that is good' (1, p. 325). Yet the extreme effects of inequality may

give a general idea of the problem that concerns me. Diderot has our sympathy when he states in his article 'Société' in the *Encyclopédie*:

There is no more inequality between the different stations in life than there is among the different characters in a comedy: the end of the play finds all the players once again in the same position, and the brief period for which their play lasted did not and could not convince any two of them that one was really above or below the other (2, p. 208).

But the life of men in society is not merely a comedy, and the hope that all will be equal in death is a feeble consolation for most. The question remains: Why is there inequality among men? Where do its causes lie? Can it be reduced, or even abolished altogether? Or do we have to accept it as a necessary element in the structure of human society?

I shall try to show that historically these were the first questions asked by sociology. By surveying the various attempts to answer them a whole history of sociological thought might be written, and I shall at least give some indication of how this may be so. So far, however, as the problem of inequality itself is concerned, this history has achieved little more than to give it a different name: what was called in the eighteenth century the origin of inequality and in the nineteenth the formation of classes, we describe today as the theory of social stratification – all this even though the original problem has not changed and no satisfactory solution to it has been found. In this essay I shall attempt a new explanation of the old problem, one that in my opinion will take us a few steps beyond the present state of our thinking.

The younger a branch of scholarship is, the more concerned are its historians to pursue its origins back at least as far as Greek antiquity. Historians of sociology are no exception to this rule. But if one regards the problem of inequality as a key to the history of sociology, it can be clearly shown not only that Plato and Aristotle were definitely not sociologists, but also why they were not. It is always awkward to ascribe to an academic discipline a precise date of birth, but this discussion may help us to date the beginnings of sociology with reasonable plausibility.

In 1792, a gentleman by the name of Meiners, described as a

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'Royal British Councillor and *rite* teacher of worldly wisdom in Göttingen', wrote some reflections on 'the causes of the inequality of estates among the most prominent European peoples'. His results were not especially original:

In all times inequality of natures has unfailingly produced inequality of rights. . . . If the negligent, the lazy, the untrained and the ignorant were to enjoy equal rights with those who display the corresponding virtues, this would be as unnatural and unjust as if the child had rights equal to those of the adult, the weak and cowardly woman rights equal to those of the strong and courageous man, the villain the same security and respect as the meritorious citizen (3, p. 41).

Meiners's reflections are a version, highly characteristic of his time, of an ideology that to the present day, and with only minor refinements, is invoked by all societies that are worried about their survival to reassure themselves of the justice of their injustices. By repeating in a simplified form the errors of Aristotle, such societies assert a pre-established harmony of things natural and social, and above all a congruence of natural differences between men and social differences between their positions. It was Aristotle, after all, who said:

It is thus clear that there are *by nature* free men and slaves, and that servitude is agreeable and just for the latter. . . . Equally, the relation of the male to the female is *by nature* such that one is superior and the other inferior, one dominates and the other is dominated. . . . With the barbarians, of course, the female and the dominated have the same rank. This is because they do not possess a naturally dominating element. . . . This is why the poets say, 'It is just that Greeks rule over barbarians,' because the barbarian and the slave are *by nature* the same (4, p. 1254b, 1252a).

Now this is just the attitude that makes impossible a sociological treatment of the problem, that is, an explanation of inequality in terms of specifically social factors expressed in propositions capable of being empirically tested.

So far, I have talked about social inequality as if it were clear what is meant by this notion. Obviously, this is a somewhat optimistic assumption. The lathe operator and the pipe fitter, the general and the sergeant, the artistically gifted child and the mechanically gifted child, the talented and the untalented, are all pairs of unequals. Yet these inequalities are evidently themselves

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rather unequal, and have to be distinguished from one another in at least two respects. First, we must distinguish between inequalities of natural capability and those of social position; second, we must distinguish between inequalities that do not involve any evaluative rank order and those that do. If we combine these two approaches, four types of inequality emerge, all of which we shall have to discuss. In relation to the individual there are (a) *natural differences of kind* in features, character and interests, and (b) *natural differences of rank* in intelligence, talent and strength (leaving open the question of whether such differences do in fact exist). Correspondingly, in relation to society (and in the language of contemporary sociology) there are (c) *social differentiation* of positions essentially equal in rank, and (d) *social stratification* based on reputation and wealth and expressed in a rank order of social status.¹

Our interest here is primarily in inequalities of the stratification type. On the question of what these are, or, more technically speaking, how they can be measured, no consensus has so far been reached, nor has a suggestion been offered that would make a consensus possible. I am accordingly making an arbitrary decision here when I distinguish the distributive area of stratification – the explicandum of our theoretical discussion – from nondistributive inequalities such as those of power.² According to this distinction, wealth and prestige belong to the area of stratification, even if they are assembled to a considerable extent by one person; property and charisma, by contrast, are nondistributive. How wealth and prestige relate to each other, and especially whether they are mutually convertible and can therefore be

1. The distinction between natural and social inequalities can be found in Rousseau; indeed, it constitutes the core of his argument. 'I perceive two kinds of inequality among men: one I call natural or physical . . . ; the other might be called moral or political' (5, p. 39). The distinction between social stratification and social differentiation, by contrast, has only recently been made unambiguously, for example by Melvin M. Tumin (6) and Walter Buckley (7). Yet this distinction is no less important than the other, as the attempt to explain social stratification in terms of social differentiation shows.

2. For what has here been called 'distributive' and 'nondistributive' one could also use the terms 'intransitive' and 'transitive' (in the grammatical sense). Transitive or nondistributive inequalities are the creators of the more passive intransitive or distributive ones.

reduced to one concept, one single 'currency' of social stratification, is an important technical question that I cannot go into here.³

Aristotle was concerned as we are here to examine the origin of the fourth type of inequality, social stratification. However, by trying to explain social stratification – as so many authors of antiquity, the Christian middle ages and modern times did after him – in terms of assumed natural differences of rank between men, he missed precisely that type of analysis which we should today describe as sociology. In consequence, his analysis subjects a potentially sociological problem to assumptions that transcend the realm of social fact and defy the test of historical experience. That this attitude helped to delay the birth of sociology by more than twenty centuries is perhaps no great loss, considering the political consequences of so unhistorical an explanation. I believe that Rousseau was right, for all his polemical tone, when he argued that it did not make sense:

to investigate whether there might not be an essential connexion between the two inequalities [the natural and the social]. For it would mean that we must ask whether rulers are necessarily worth more than the ruled, and whether strength of body and mind, wisdom and virtue are always found in the same individuals, and found, moreover, in direct relation to their power or wealth; a question that slaves who think they are being overheard by their masters may find it useful to discuss, but that has no meaning for reasonable and free men in search of the truth (5, p. 39).⁴

3. A possible currency of this kind might be the (structured) 'chances of participation' – or, in Weber's terms, 'life chances' – that we acquire by virtue of our positions.

4. Clearly Aristotle and numerous thinkers between his time and the revolutionary period had important sociological insights; one need only mention the way Aristotle relates social strata to political constitutions in the *Politics*. Nor would it be correct to charge Aristotle with having naïvely asserted the congruence of natural and social inequalities. But Aristotle (to say nothing of Plato) and all others down to the eighteenth century lacked what one might call pervasive 'sociological thinking', i.e. an unwavering sense of the autonomously social (and thus historical) level of reality. Such thinking required a radical break with the undisputed constants of earlier epochs, a break that first became general in the age of the great revolutions. For this reason one may well derive the birth of sociology from the spirit of revolution.

This is Rousseau's argument in his prize essay in 1754 on 'The Origin of Inequality among Men and Whether It Is Legitimated by Natural Laws'. Unlike his earlier essay of 1750 on 'The Moral Consequences of Progress in the Arts and Sciences', this essay was not awarded the prize of the Dijon Academy. I do not know why the judges preferred the essay of 'a certain Abbé Talbert' (as one editor of Rousseau's work describes him); but conceivably they began to feel uneasy about the radical implications of their own question. For the new meaning given by Rousseau and his contemporaries to the question of the origin of inequality involved a revolution in politics as well as intellectual history.

The pivotal point of the Aristotelian argument – if I may use this formula as an abbreviation for all treatments of the problem before the eighteenth century – was the assumption that men are by nature unequal in rank, and that there is therefore a natural rank order among men. This presupposition collapsed in the face of the assumption of natural law that the natural rank of all men is equal. Politically, this meant that together with all other hierarchies, the hierarchies of society also lost their claim to unquestioning respect. If men are equal by nature, then social inequalities cannot be established by nature or God; and if they are not so established, then they are subject to change, and the privileged of today may be the outcasts of tomorrow; it may then even be possible to abolish all inequalities. A straight road leads from such reflections to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789: 'Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social differences, therefore, can only be based on general utility.'

In terms of intellectual history, the same process meant that the question of the origin of inequality was now phrased in a new and different, i.e. sociological, manner. If men are by nature equal in rank, where do social inequalities come from? If all men are born free and equal in rights, how can we explain that some are rich and others poor, some respected and others ignored, some powerful and others in servitude? Once the question was posed in these terms, only a sociological answer was possible.⁵ With good

5. Historically, therefore, one necessary condition of the sociological mode of inquiry into the origin of equality was the assumption of the natural equality (equality of rank) of all men. But here as so often what was

reason, then, Werner Sombart and others have seen the beginnings of sociology in the works of those authors who first tried to give a sociological answer to this question – notably the French *philosophes*, the Scottish moral philosophers and political economists, and the thinkers of the German Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁶

The first sociological explanation of the origin of inequality proved disappointing, though for a century it reappeared in a succession of new forms. It consisted in a figure of thought, which may be demonstrated by further reference to Rousseau's prize essay.

As we have seen, Rousseau begins by assuming the natural equality of men. In the style of his time, he then projects this assumption into history and constructs a pre-social original state in which there was complete equality of all, where no one was superior to anyone else in either rank or status. Inequality, he argues, came about as a result of leaving the state of nature; it is a kind of original sin, which he links with the emergence of private property. How private property itself came into existence, Rousseau does not explain; instead, he confines himself to a statement as obscure as it is concrete: 'The first man who fenced in an area and said, "This is mine," and who found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society' (5, p. 66).

Not all of Rousseau's contemporaries, even those who shared

historically necessary is logically superfluous: once the question of the origin of inequality is posed in a sociological way (i.e. without recourse to natural inequalities), its answer has nothing to do with whether or not men are by nature equal or unequal. Thus the difficult philosophical question of the natural rank of men can be set aside here as irrelevant to the truth or falsity of sociological explanations of social stratification. We rule out only explanations based on the assumed congruence, or tendency to congruence, of the natural and social rank orders.

6. Few historians of sociology have taken up Sombart's reference to the Scottish moral philosophers and their attack on natural law (8); apart from a recently published dissertation (9), only William C. Lehmann has elaborated on it (10, 11). Parallel developments on the Continent are described even more rarely. One can write the history of sociology in many ways, of course; but it seems to me that the origin of inequality would be far from the worst central theme.

most of his assumptions, accepted the one-sidedness of his explanation or his evaluation of the process he described. Adam Ferguson's *History of Civil Society* (1767) and John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) come quite close to Rousseau in assuming a natural state of equality and ascribing to property the crucial part (Millar) or at least an important part (Ferguson) in destroying this natural state. But both of them regard the fact that men have learned 'to strive for riches and admire distinctions', and thus to differentiate according to income and prestige, not as a curse but as a step toward the civilization of 'civil society' (see 12, vol. 2, pp. 2, 3).

Even further removed from Rousseau the romantic Utopian are Schiller's Jena lectures of 1789, 'On the First Human Society'; the title is a clear, if implicit, reference to Kant's essay on the 'Probable Beginning of Human History', which in turn referred explicitly to Rousseau's essay (see 13, pp. 322, 325). Schiller praises the 'abolition of equality of status' as the step that enabled man to leave the 'tranquil nausea of his paradise' (13, pp. 600–601). But the assumption of an original state of equality, and the explanation of the origin of inequality in terms of private property, remained unchallenged from Rousseau to Lorenzo von Stein and Karl Marx.⁷

7. Obviously these men's arguments were not as simple as this account may suggest. The most unambiguous emphasis on property as a cause of inequality is found in Rousseau, Millar, Stein and Marx. Millar displays a nice historical concreteness on this point: 'The invention of taming and pasturing cattle gives rise to a more remarkable and permanent distinction of ranks. Some persons, by being more industrious or more fortunate than others, are led in a short time to acquire more numerous herds and flocks' (14, p. 204). Property here has a very definite sociological sense which becomes even clearer in Stein (15, p. 275): 'Class formation is that process by which the distribution of property leads to a distribution of spiritual rights, goods, and functions among the individual members of society, such that the attributes of persistence and fixity are transferred from property to social position and function.' This means that property both causes inequality and stabilizes it socially; as Ferguson aptly puts it, 'Possessions descend, and the luster of family grows brighter with age' (12, p. 166).

The other authors mentioned here do not give property quite the same prominence; in varying degrees they invoke the division of labor, the motive of conquest and natural differences in rank between men. Rousseau and Marx are unrivaled in their radical insistence on property as the sole cause of social inequality.

For many writers between 1750 and 1850, and for their public, the explanation of inequality in terms of private property remained politically attractive. A society without private property is at least conceivable; and if the idea of equality is associated with this notion, the abolition of private property may become the supreme goal of political action. Indeed, it can be argued that two great revolutions have been abetted to no small extent by the association of inequality with private property, one by Rousseau's dream of re-establishing the original, natural equality of man, the other by Marx's dream of a communist society. Attractive as this explanation may be to some people, however, and though it represents an undeniable methodological advance over the Aristotelian argument, it does not stand the test of historical experience.

To be sure, private property was never completely abolished in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the disappointment of the Webbs and other Socialist visitors in the 1930s, caused by the evident inequalities of income and rank in the Soviet Union, may be taken as an experimental refutation of the thesis of Rousseau and Millar, Ferguson and Schiller, Stein and Marx. In the Soviet Union, in Yugoslavia, in Israel and wherever else private property has been reduced to virtual insignificance, we still find social stratification. Even if such stratification is prevented for a short period from manifesting itself in differences of possessions and income (as in the *kibbutzim* of Israel), the undefinable yet effective force of prestige continues to create a noticeable rank order. If social inequality were really based on private property, the abolition of private property would have to result in the elimination of inequality. Experience in propertyless and quasi-propertyless societies does not confirm this proposition. We may therefore regard it as disproved.⁸

8. The scientific significance of Communism can hardly be overestimated in this context, though it provides yet another example of the human cost of historical experiments. For almost two centuries, property dominated social and political thought: as a source of everything good or evil, as a principle to be retained or abolished. Today we know (though we do not yet have the most rigorous sort of proof) that the abolition of property merely replaces the old classes with new ones, so that from Locke to Lenin the social and political significance of property has been vastly overestimated.

Stein and Marx are only marginal members of the group of writers who, by explaining the origin of stratification in terms of property, contributed to the emergence of sociology. Both Stein and Marx (and, to a lesser extent, Ferguson and several political economists of the late eighteenth century) mention a second factor in addition to property, one that came to dominate the discussion of the formation of classes, as our problem was now called, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. This factor was the division of labor.

As early as the 1870s Engels, in his *Anti-Dühring*, had developed a theory of class formation on the basis of the division of labor. The subsequent discussion, however, is associated pre-eminently with the name of Gustav Schmoller. It began with the famous controversy between Schmoller and Treitschke over Schmoller's essay on 'The Social Question and the Prussian State' – a controversy that is of interest to us here because it raised once again the question of whether a sociological science was possible. Against Schmoller, Treitschke argued (one would be tempted to say a century too late, if this were not characteristic of the whole of German history) for a congruence of natural and social rank orders. Schmoller (with arguments often no less curious) tried to explain the formation of classes by the division of labor.

Schmoller's essays on 'The Facts of the Division of Labor' and 'The Nature of the Division of Labor and the Formation of Classes', published in 1889 and 1890, prompted Karl Bücher's polemical Leipzig inaugural lecture of 1892 on 'The Division of Labor and the Formation of Social Classes', which was later extended and modified in his book *The Emergence of Economy*. This in turn was attacked not only by Schmoller, but by Emile Durkheim in his *Division of Labor in Society*. Durkheim also discussed at some length Georg Simmel's 'On Social Differentiation', which had appeared in 1890 in Schmoller's *Staatswissenschaftliche Forschungen*. Schmoller greeted Durkheim gladly in a review 'as one striving to the same end, although he has not convinced us altogether', and continued to pursue the subject and his thesis. After Schmoller's death in 1917, however, both the subject and his view of it found few friends – only Pontus Fahlbeck and (with reservations) Franz Oppenheimer and Joseph Schumpeter

come to mind – before they were forgotten, at which point, of course, the dispute remained unresolved.

Many of the issues that came up in the course of this prolonged debate cannot be discussed here, either because they lead us too far from our subject or because they are merely historical curiosities. Notable among the other issues was Simmel's and Durkheim's discussion of the relation between the division of labor and social integration.⁹ Among the historical curiosities is Schmoller's theory of the genetics of special abilities acquired by the progressive division of labor. Bücher rightly attacked this theory repeatedly and violently, without succeeding in forcing out of Schmoller more than very minor concessions. Yet Schmoller's position, especially in his early papers of 1889 and 1890, contains elements of a theory of class formation that has to be taken quite seriously, if only because in a new (but not very different) form it seems to play a certain role in contemporary sociology.

According to Schmoller's theory, class formation (that is, inequality of rank) is based on the fact that occupations are differentiated. However one may wish to explain the division of labor itself – Schmoller explains it in terms of the exchange principle, Bücher in terms of property (and neither regards it as universal) – differentiation precedes the stratification of social positions. 'The emergence of social classes always depends in the first instance on an advance in the division of labor within a people or a nation' (16, p. 74). Or even more clearly: 'The difference in social rank

9. For Simmel and Durkheim, and to some extent for Bücher and even Schmoller, the division of labor was the main concern, and class formation merely one of its aspects. There would certainly be a point in re-examining the origin of inequality of the differentiation type as well as inequality of the stratification type. The main question is whether the division of labor is based on the natural differences among men (between man and woman, adult and child, etc.), or whether it might be explained by purely social factors (such as technical development). As with stratification, one of the problems of the division of labor is whether it is a universal phenomenon, or a historically developed and therefore at least potentially ephemeral one (as Marx as well as Schmoller and Bücher believed). The consequences of the division of labor, too, require a re-examination that goes beyond Durkheim's at many points. I mention these problems to show that in confining ourselves to explanations of class formation by the division of labor, we are considering only a small segment of the sociological debate of the turn of the century.

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and property, in prestige and income, is merely a secondary consequence of social differentiation' (see 16, p. 29).

Schmoller later modified his position without disavowing the principles on which it rested (see 17, p. 428 ff.). It must be admitted, however, that the crucial arguments against his views were not made in the literature of the time. To state them, we must remember the distinction between social differentiation and social stratification introduced above.

Since we tend, particularly in modern society, to associate social rank with occupational position, one might be led to suspect that differences of rank are in fact based on the differentiation of occupations. On the contrary, it must be emphasized that the notion of differentiation does not in itself imply any distinctions of rank or value among the differentiated elements. From the point of view of the division of labor (the 'functional organization' of industrial sociology), there is no difference in rank between the director, the typist, the foreman, the pipe fitter and the unskilled laborer of an enterprise: these are all partial activities equally indispensable for the attainment of the goal in question. If in fact we do associate a rank order (or 'scalar organization') with these activities, we do so as an additional act of evaluation, one that is neither caused nor explained by the division of labor; indeed, the same activities may be evaluated quite differently in different societies. What we have, then, is a rank order (i.e. a social stratification) of activities that in functional terms are merely differentiated in kind.¹⁰

Schmoller seems to have sensed this gap in his argument when, in later editions, he suddenly inserted a 'psychological fact' between the division of labor and the formation of classes: 'the need for human thought and feeling to bring all related phenomena of any kind into a sequence, and estimate and order them according to their value' (17, pp. 428–9). However factual this fact may be, that Schmoller felt compelled to introduce it serves as further evidence that social differentiation and social stratification cannot explain each other without some intermediate agency.

10. One difficult question remains unresolved here: whether there are two different kinds of coordination of partial activities – one 'functional', which merely follows 'inherent necessities' and completes the division of labor, and one 'scalar', which produces a rank order founded on other requirements.

This conclusion played an important part in the third major historical phase of sociological theorizing about the origin of inequality: the American discussion of the theory of social stratification. Since Talcott Parsons first published his 'Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification' in 1940, there has been an unceasing debate over the so-called 'functional' theory of social stratification. Almost all major American sociologists have taken part in this debate, which – unknown though it still is on the Continent – represents one of the more significant contributions of American sociology towards our understanding of social structures.

The chief immediate effect of Parsons's essay of 1940 was to acquaint American sociologists with the idea of a theory of social stratification. The largely conceptual paper published by Parson's disciple Kingsley Davis in 1942 was also mainly preparatory in character. The discussion proper did not begin until 1945, when Davis and Wilbert E. Moore published 'Some Principles of Stratification'. Both Rousseau and his successors and Schmoller and his adherents had regarded inequality as a historical phenomenon. For both, since there had once been a period of equality, the elimination of inequality was conceivable. Davis and Moore, by contrast, saw inequality as a functional necessity in all human societies – i.e. as indispensable for the maintenance of any social structure whatever – and hence as impossible to eliminate.

Their argument, at least in its weaknesses, is not altogether dissimilar to Schmoller's. It runs as follows. There are in every society different social positions. These positions – e.g. occupations – are not equally pleasant, nor are they equally important or difficult. In order to guarantee the complete and frictionless allocation of all positions, certain rewards have to be associated with them – namely, the very rewards that constitute the criteria of social stratification. In all societies, the importance of different positions to the society and the market value of the required qualifications determine the unequal distribution of income, prestige and power. Inequality is necessary because without it the differentiated (occupational) positions of societies cannot be adequately filled.

Several other writers, among them Marion J. Levy and Bernard Barber, have adopted this theory more or less without modifica-

tion. But it has been subjected to severe criticism, and despite several thoughtful replies by the original authors, some of the criticisms seem to be gaining ground. The most persistent critic, Melvin M. Tumin, has presented two main arguments against Davis and Moore (in two essays published in 1953 and 1955). The first is that the notion of the 'functional importance' of positions is extremely imprecise, and that it probably implies the very differentiation of value that it allegedly explains. The second is that two of the assumptions made by Davis and Moore – that of a harmonious congruence between stratification and the distribution of talent, and that of differential motivation by unequal incentives – are theoretically problematical and empirically uncertain.

This second argument was bolstered in 1955 by Richard Schwartz, whose analysis of two Israeli communities showed that it is in fact possible to fill positions adequately without an unequal distribution of social rewards (18). Buckley charged Davis and Moore in 1958 with confusing differentiation and stratification; unfortunately, however, his legitimate objection to the evaluative undertones of the notion of 'functional importance' led in the end to an unpromising terminological dispute. Since then, criticism of the functional theory of stratification has taken two forms. Some critics have followed Dennis Wrong, who in 1959 took up Tumin's suggestion that Davis and Moore had underestimated the 'dysfunctions' of social stratification, i.e. the disruptive consequences of social inequality (19); the conservative character of the functional theory has been emphasized even more clearly by Gerhard Lenski (20). Other critics have raised methodological objections, questioning the value of a discussion of sociological universals that ignores variations observed in the workings of real societies.¹¹

But the significance of the American debate on stratification is

11. The origin of inequality has been only one of several subjects of dispute in the American debate on stratification. Davis and Moore, for example, after their first few pages, turn to the empirical problems of the effect and variability of stratification. Their critics do much the same thing. But the dispute was ignited by the 'functional explanation of inequality': its substantive justification, its scientific fruitfulness and its political significance. The dispute, which still continues, may be seen as a commentary on the subterranean conflicts in American sociology.

only partly to be found in its subject matter. In this respect, its main conclusion would seem to be that social inequality has many functions and dysfunctions (that is, many consequences for the structure of societies), but that there can be no satisfactory functional explanation of the origin of inequality. This is because every such explanation is bound either to have recourse to dubious assumptions about human nature or to commit the *petitio principii* error of explanation in terms of the object to be explained. Yet this discussion, like its historical predecessors, has at several points produced valuable propositions, some of them mere remarks made in passing. With the help of these propositions, let us now attempt to formulate a theory of social stratification that is theoretically satisfactory and, above all, empirically fruitful.¹²

The very first contribution to the American debate on stratification, the essay by Parsons, contained an idea which, although untenable in Parsons's form, may still advance our understanding of the problem. Parsons tries to derive the necessity of a differentiated rank order from the existence of the concept of evaluation and its significance for social systems. The effort to formulate an ontological proof of stratification is more surprising than convincing – as Parsons himself seems to have felt, for in the revised version of his essay, published in 1953, he relates the

12. The concentration of my historical account of discussions of inequality on three epochs and positions – property in the eighteenth century, division of labor in the nineteenth and function in the twentieth – rests on my conviction that these are the most important stages in the discussion of the subject. But historically this account involves some questionable simplifications. As early as 1922, Fahlbeck (23, pp. 13–15) distinguished four explanations of inequality: (a) 'differences in estate are exclusively the work of war and conquest in large things, force and perfidy in little ones'; (b) 'in property and its differential distribution' can be found 'the real reason for all social differences'; (c) 'the origin and *raison d'être* of classes' can be traced to 'the connexions with the general economic factors of nature, capital, and labor'; and (d) 'classes are a fruit{of the division of labor'. (Fahlbeck favors the last.) To these we should have to add at least the natural-differences explanation and the functional explanation. All six notions found support, at times side by side in the same works, and all six would have to be taken into account in a reasonably complete historical account of the problem. It is another question whether such an account would advance our knowledge.

existence of a concept of evaluation to the mere probability, not the necessity, of inequality.¹³ In fact, Parsons's thesis contains little more than the suggestion, formulated much more simply by Barber, that men tend to evaluate themselves and the things of their world differently (21, p. 2). This suggestion in turn refers back to Schmoller's 'psychological assumption' of a human tendency to produce evaluative rank orders, but it also refers – and here the relation between evaluation and stratification begins to be sociologically relevant – to Durkheim's famous proposition that 'every society is a moral community'. Durkheim rightly remarks that 'the state of nature of the eighteenth-century philosophers is, if not immoral, at least amoral' (22, p. 394). The idea of the social contract is nothing but the idea of the institution of compulsory social norms backed by sanctions. It is at this point that the possibility arises of connecting the concept of human society with the problem of the origin of inequality – a possibility that is occasionally hinted at in the literature but that has so far gone unrealized.¹⁴

Human society always means that people's behavior is being removed from the randomness of chance and regulated by established and inescapable expectations. The compulsory character of these expectations or norms¹⁵ is based on the operation of sanctions, i.e. of rewards or punishments for conformist or deviant behavior. If every society is in this sense a moral community, it

13. Parsons 1940 (24, p. 843): 'If both human individuals as units and moral evaluation are essential to social systems, it follows that these individuals *will be* evaluated as units.' And 1953 (25, p. 387): 'Given the process of evaluation, *the probability is* that it will serve to differentiate entities in a rank order of some kind.' (My emphases.) In both cases, as so often at those points of Parsons's work where classification is less important than conceptual imagination and rigor of statement, his argument is remarkably weak.

14. An attempt in this direction has recently been made by Lenski, but his approach and the one offered here differ significantly in their paratheoretical and methodological presuppositions.

15. Since expectations, as constituent parts of roles, are always related to concrete social positions, whereas norms are general in their formulation and their claim to validity, the 'or' in the phrase 'expectations or norms' may at first seem misleading. Actually, this is just a compressed way of expressing the idea that role expectations are nothing but concretized social norms ('institutions').

follows that there must always be at least that inequality of rank which results from the necessity of sanctioning behavior according to whether it does or does not conform to established norms. Under whatever aspect given historical societies may introduce additional distinctions between their members, whatever symbols they may declare to be outward signs of inequality, and whatever may be the precise content of their social norms, the hard core of social inequality can always be found in the fact that men as the incumbents of social roles are subject, according to how their roles relate to the dominant expectational principles of society, to sanctions designed to enforce these principles.¹⁶

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by some examples which, however difficult they may seem, are equally relevant. If the ladies of a neighborhood are expected to exchange secrets and scandals with their neighbors, this norm will lead at the very least to a distinction between those held in high regard (who really enjoy gossip, and offer tea and cakes as well), those with average prestige and the outsiders (who, for whatever reasons, take no part in the gossiping). If, in a factory, high individual output is expected from the workers and rewarded by piecework rates, there will be some who take home a relatively high paycheck and others who take home a relatively low one. If the citizens (or better, perhaps, subjects) of a state are expected to defend its official ideology as frequently and convincingly as possible, this will lead to a distinction between those who get ahead (becoming, say, civil servants or party secretaries); the mere followers, who lead a quiet but somewhat anxious existence; and those who pay with their liberty or even their lives for their deviant behavior.

16. A similar idea may be found at one point in the American discussion of stratification – as distinguished, perhaps, from Othmar Spann's biology-based argument (26, p. 293), 'The law of stratification of society is the ordering of value strata', which might seem superficially similar – in a passing remark by Tumin (6, p. 392). 'What does seem to be unavoidable,' Tumin says, 'is that differential prestige shall be given to those in any society who conform to the normative order as against those who deviate from that order in a way judged immoral and detrimental. On the assumption that the continuity of a society depends on the continuity and stability of its normative order, some such distinction between conformists and deviants seems inescapable.' It seems to me that the assumption of a 'continuity and stability of the normative order' is quite superfluous; it shows how closely Tumin remains tied to the functional approach.

One might think that individual, not social, inequalities are in fact established by the distinction between those who for essentially personal reasons (as we must initially assume, and have assumed in the examples) are either unprepared for or incapable of conformism and those who punctiliously fulfill every norm. For example, social stratification is always a rank order in terms of prestige and not esteem, i.e. a rank order of positions (worker, woman, resident of a certain area, etc.), which can be thought of independently of their individual incumbents. By contrast, attitudes toward norms as governed by sanctions seem to be attitudes of individuals. There might therefore seem to be a link missing between the sanctioning of individual behavior and the inequality of social positions. This missing link is, however, contained in the notion of social norm as we have used it so far.

It appears plausible to assume that the number of values capable of regulating human behavior is unlimited. Our imagination permits the construction of an infinite number of customs and laws. Norms, i.e. socially established values, are therefore always a selection from the universe of possible established values. At this point, however, we should remember that the selection of norms always involves discrimination, not only against persons holding sociologically random moral convictions, but also against social positions that may debar their incumbents from conformity with established values.

Thus if gossip among neighbors becomes a norm, the professional woman necessarily becomes an outsider who cannot compete in prestige with ordinary housewives. If piecework rates are in force in a factory, the older worker is at a disadvantage by comparison with the younger ones, the woman by comparison with men. If it becomes the duty of the citizen to defend the ideology of the state, those who went to school before the establishment of this state cannot compete with those born into it. Professional woman, old man, young man and child of a given state are all social positions, which may be thought of independently of their individual human incumbents. Since every society discriminates in this sense against certain positions (and thereby all their incumbents, actual and potential), and since, moreover, every society uses sanctions to make such discrimination effective, social norms and sanctions are the basis not only of ephemeral

individual rankings but also of lasting structures of social positions.

The origin of inequality is thus to be found in the existence in all human societies of norms of behavior to which sanctions are attached. What we normally call the law, i.e. the system of laws and penalties, does not in ordinary usage comprise the whole range of the sociological notions of norm and sanction. If, however, we take the law in its broadest sense as the epitome of all norms and sanctions, including those not codified, we may say that the law is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of social inequality. There is inequality because there is law; if there is law, there must also be inequality among men.

This is, of course, equally true in societies where equality before the law is recognized as a constitutional principle. If I may be allowed a somewhat flippant formulation, which is nevertheless seriously meant, my proposed explanation of inequality means in the case of our own society that all men are equal *before* the law but they are no longer equal *after* it: i.e. after they have, as we put it, 'come in contact with' the law. So long as norms do not exist, and in so far as they do not effectively act on people ('before the law'), there is no social stratification; once there are norms that impose inescapable requirements on people's behavior and once their actual behavior is measured in terms of these norms ('after the law'), a rank order of social status is bound to emerge.

Important though it is to emphasize that by norms and sanctions we also mean laws and penalties in the sense of positive law, the introduction of the legal system as an illustrative *pars pro toto* can itself be very misleading. Ordinarily, it is only the idea of punishment that we associate with legal norms as the guarantee of their compulsory character.¹⁷ The force of legal sanctions produces the distinction between the lawbreaker and those who succeed in never coming into conflict with any legal rule. Conformism in this sense is at best rewarded with the absence of penalties.

17. Possibly this is a vulgar interpretation of the law, in the sense that legal norms (which are after all only a special case of social norms) probably have their validity guaranteed by positive as well as negative sanctions. It may be suspected, however, that negative sanctions are preponderant to the extent to which norms are compulsory – and since most legal norms (almost by definition) are compulsory to a particularly great extent, behavior conforming to legal norms is generally not rewarded.

Certainly, this crude division between 'conformists' and 'deviants' constitutes an element of social inequality, and it should be possible in principle to use legal norms to demonstrate the relation between legal sanctions and social stratification. But an argument along these lines would limit both concepts – sanction and stratification – to a rather feeble residual meaning.

It is by no means necessary (although customary in ordinary language) to conceive of sanctions solely as penalties. For the present argument, at least, it is important to recognize positive sanctions (rewards) as both equal in kind and similar in function to negative sanctions (punishments). Only if we regard reward and punishment, incentive and threat, as related instruments for maintaining social norms do we begin to see that applying social norms to human behavior in the form of sanctions necessarily creates a system of inequality of rank, and that social stratification is therefore an immediate result of the control of social behavior by positive and negative sanctions. Apart from their immediate task of enforcing the normative patterns of social behavior, sanctions always create, almost as a by-product, a rank order of distributive status, whether this is measured in terms of prestige, or wealth, or both.

The presuppositions of this explanation are obvious. Using eighteenth-century concepts, one might describe them in terms of the social contract (*pacte d'association*) and the contract of government (*pacte de gouvernement*). The explanation sketched here presupposes (a) that every society is a moral community, and therefore recognizes norms that regulate the conduct of its members; (b) that these norms require sanctions to enforce them by rewarding conformity and penalizing deviance.

It may perhaps be argued that by relating social stratification to these presuppositions we have not solved our problem but relegated its solution to a different level. Indeed, it might seem necessary from both a philosophical and a sociological point of view to ask some further questions. Where do the norms that regulate social behavior come from? Under what conditions do these norms change in historical societies? Why must their compulsory character be enforced by sanctions? Is this in fact the case in all historical societies? I think, however, that whatever the answers to these questions may be, it has been helpful to reduce social

stratification to the existence of social norms backed by sanctions, since this explanation shows the derivative nature of the problem of inequality. In addition, the derivation suggested here has the advantage of leading back to presuppositions (the existence of norms and the necessity of sanctions) that may be regarded as axiomatic, at least in the context of sociological theory, and therefore do not require further analysis for the time being.

To sum up, the origin of social inequality lies neither in human nature nor in a historically dubious conception of private property. It lies rather in certain features of all human societies, which are (or can be seen as) necessary to them. Although the differentiation of social positions – the division of labor, or more generally the multiplicity of roles – may be one such universal feature of all societies, it lacks the element of evaluation necessary to explain distinctions of rank. Evaluative differentiation, the ordering of social positions and their incumbent scales of prestige or income, is effected only by the sanctioning of social behavior in terms of normative expectations. Because there are norms and because sanctions are necessary to enforce conformity of human conduct, there has to be inequality of rank among men.

Social stratification is a very real element of our everyday lives, much more so than this highly abstract and indeed seemingly inconsequential discussion would suggest. It is necessary, then, to make clear the empirical relevance of these reflections, or at least to indicate what follows from this kind of analysis for our knowledge of society. Such a clarification is all the more necessary since the preceding discussion is informed, however remotely, by a view of sociology as an empirical science, a science in which observation can decide the truth or falsity of statements. What, then, do our considerations imply for sociological analysis?

First, let us consider its conceptual implications. Social stratification, as I have used the term, is above all a system of distributive status, i.e. a system of differential distribution of desired and scarce things. Honor and wealth, or, as we say today, prestige and income, may be the most general means of effecting such a differentiation of rank, but there is no reason to assume that it

could not be effected by entirely different criteria.¹⁸ As far as legitimate power is concerned, however, it has only one aspect that can be seen as affecting social stratification, namely patronage, or the distribution of power as a reward for certain deeds or virtues. Thus to explain differences of rank in terms of the necessity of sanctions is not to explain the power structure of societies;¹⁹ it is rather to explain stratification in terms of the social structure of power and authority (using these terms to express Weber's distinction between *Macht* and *Herrschaft*). If the explanation of inequality offered here is correct, power and power structures logically precede the structures of social stratification.²⁰

It is hard to imagine a society whose system of norms and sanctions functions without an authority structure to sustain it. Time

18. Honor and wealth (or prestige and income) are general in the sense that they epitomize the ideal and the material differences in rank among men.

19. Thus the theory advanced here does not explain the origin of power and of inequalities in the distribution of power. That the origin of power also requires explanation, at least in a para-theoretical context, is evident from the discussion of the universality of historicity of power (see below). What an explanation of inequalities of power might look like is hard to say; Heinrich Popitz suggests that the social corollaries of the succession of generations are responsible for such inequalities.

20. This conclusion implies a substantial revision of my previously published views. For a long time I was convinced that there was a strict logical equivalence between the analysis of social classes and constraint theory, and between the analysis of social stratification and integration theory. The considerations developed in the present essay changed my mind. I have now come to believe that stratification is merely a consequence of the structure of power, integration a special case of constraint, and thus the structural-functional approach a subset of a broader approach. The assumption that constraint theory and integration theory are two approaches of equal rank, i.e. two different perspectives on the same material, is not so much false as superfluous; we get the same result by assuming that stratification follows from power, integration from constraint, stability from change. Since the latter assumption is the simpler one, it is to be preferred.

This conclusion may also be seen as opposing the 'synthesis' of 'conservative' and 'radical' theories of stratification proposed by Lenski (20). It seems to me that this synthesis is in fact merely a superficial compromise, which is superseded at important points by Lenski himself: 'The distribution of rewards in a society is a function of the distribution of power, not of system needs' (20, p. 63).

and again, anthropologists have told us of 'tribes without rulers', and sociologists of societies that regulate themselves without power or authority. But in opposition to such fantasies, I incline with Weber to describe 'every order that is not based on the personal, free agreement of all involved' (i.e. every order that does not rest on the voluntary consensus of all its members) as 'imposed', i.e. based on authority and subordination (27, ch. 13, p. 27). Since a *volonté de tous* seems possible only in flights of fancy, we have to assume that a third fundamental category of sociological analysis belongs alongside the two concepts of norm and sanction: that of institutionalized power. Society *means* that norms regulate human conduct; this regulation is guaranteed by the incentive or threat of sanctions; the possibility of imposing sanctions is the abstract core of all power.

I am inclined to believe that all other categories of sociological analysis may be derived from the unequal but closely related trinity of norm, sanction and power.²¹ At any rate, this is true of social stratification, which therefore belongs on a lower level of generality than power. To reveal the explosiveness of this analysis we need only turn it into an empirical proposition: the system of inequality that we call social stratification is only a secondary consequence of the social structure of power.

The establishment of norms in a society means that conformity is rewarded and deviance punished. The sanctioning of conformity and deviance in this sense means that the ruling groups of society have thrown their power behind the maintenance of norms. In the last analysis, established norms are nothing but ruling norms, i.e. norms defended by the sanctioning agencies of society and those who control them. This means that the person

21. This is a large claim, which would justify at least an essay of its own. For our present purposes only two remarks need be added. First, the three categories are obviously disparate. Sanction is primarily a kind of intermediate concept (between norm and power), although as such it is quite decisive. Norm has to be understood as anterior to power, just as the social contract is anterior to the contract of government (this may help as a standard of orientation). Second, we must ask whether the 'elementary category' of social role can also be derived from the trinity norm-sanction-power. I tend to think it can, at least in so far as roles are complexes of norms concretized into expectations. Beyond that, however, the question is open.

who will be most favorably placed in society is the person who best succeeds in adapting himself to the ruling norms; conversely, it means that the established or ruling values of a society may be studied in their purest form by looking at its upper class. Anyone whose place in the coordinate system of social positions and roles makes him unable to conform punctiliously to his society's expectations must not be surprised if the higher grades of prestige and income remain closed to him and go to others who find it easier to conform. In this sense, every society honors the conformity that sustains it, i.e. sustains its ruling groups; but by the same token every society also produces within itself the resistance that brings it down.

Naturally, the basic equating of conformist or deviant behavior with high or low status is deflected and complicated in historical societies by many secondary factors. (In general, it must be emphasized that the explanation of inequality proposed here has no immediate extension to the history of inequality or the philosophy behind it.) Among other things, the ascriptive character of the criteria determining social status in a given epoch (such as nobility or property) may bring about a kind of stratification lag: that is, status structures may lag behind changes in norms and power relations, so that the upper class of a bygone epoch may retain its status position for a while under new conditions. Yet normally we do not have to wait long for such processes as the *déclassement* of the nobility' or the 'loss of function of property' which have occurred in several contemporary societies.

There are good reasons to think that our own society is tending toward a period of 'meritocracy' as predicted by Michael Young, i.e. rule by the possessors of diplomas and other tickets of admission to the upper reaches of society issued by the educational system. If this is so, the hypothesis of stratification lag would suggest that in due course the members of the traditional upper strata (the nobility, the inheritors of wealth and property) will have to bestir themselves to obtain diplomas and academic titles in order to keep their position; for the ruling groups of every society have a tendency to try to adapt the existing system of social inequality to the established norms and values, i.e. their own. Nevertheless, despite this basic tendency we can never

expect historical societies to exhibit full congruence between the scales of stratification and the structures of power.²²

The image of society that follows from this exceedingly general and abstract analysis is in two respects non-Utopian and thereby anti-Utopian as well.²³ On the one hand, it has none of the explicit or concealed romanticism of a revolutionary Utopia *à la* Rousseau or Marx. If it is true that inequalities among men follow from the very concept of societies as moral communities, then there cannot be, in the world of our experience, a society of absolute equals. Of course, equality before the law, equal suffrage, equal chances of education and other concrete equalities are not only possible but in many countries real. But the idea of a society in which all distinctions of rank between men are abolished transcends what is sociologically possible and has a place only in the sphere of poetic imagination. Wherever political programs promise societies without class or strata, a harmonious community of comrades who are all equals in rank, the reduction of all inequalities to functional differences, and the like, we have reason to be suspicious, if only because political promises are often merely a thin veil for the threat of terror and constraint. Wherever ruling groups or their ideologists try to tell us that in their society all men are equal, we can rely on George Orwell's suspicion that 'some are more equal than others'.

The approach put forward here is in yet another sense a path out of Utopia. If we survey the explanations of inequality in recent American sociology – and this holds for Parsons and Barber as it

22. The variability of historical patterns of stratification is so great that any abstract and general analysis of the kind offered here is bound to mislead. The criteria, forms, and symbols of stratification vary, as does their meaning for human behavior, and in every historical epoch we find manifold superimpositions. The question of what form stratification took in the earliest known societies is entirely open. This is but one of the many limitations of the present analysis.

23. The following para-theoretical discussion is *inter alia* a criticism of Lenski's oversimple dichotomy between 'conservative' and 'radical' theories of stratification. Our approach is 'radical' in assuming the dominant force of power structures, but 'conservative' in its suspicion that the unequal distribution of power and status cannot be abolished. Other combinations are conceivable.

does for Davis and Moore – we find that they betray a view of society from which there is no road leading to an understanding of the historical quality of social structures. In a less obvious sense this is also true, I think, of Rousseau and Marx; but it is more easily demonstrable by reference to recent sociological theory.²⁴ The American functionalists tell us that we ought to look at societies as entities functioning without friction, and that inequality among men (since it happens to exist) abets this functioning. This point of view, however useful in other ways, may then lead to conclusions like the following by Barber: 'Men have a sense of justice fulfilled and of virtue rewarded when they feel that they are fairly ranked as superior and inferior by the value standards of their own moral community' (7, p. 7). Even Barber's subsequent treatment of the 'dysfunctions' of stratification cannot wipe out the impression that the society he is thinking of does not need history any more because everything has been settled in the best possible way already: everybody, wherever he stands, is content with his place in society, and a common value system unites all men in a big, happy family.

It seems to me that whereas an instrument of this kind may enable us to understand Plato's Republic, it does not describe any real society in history. Possibly social inequality has some importance for the integration of societies. But another consequence of its operation seems rather more interesting. If the analysis proposed here proves useful, inequality is closely related to the social constraint that grows out of sanctions and structures of power. This would mean that the system of stratification, like sanctions and structures of institutionalized power, always tends to its own abolition. The assumption that those who are less favorably placed in society will strive to impose a system of norms that promises them a better rank is certainly more plausible and fruitful than the assumption that the poor in reputation and wealth will love their society for its justice.

Since the 'value system' of a society is universal only in the

24. The assumption that history follows a predetermined and recognizable plan is static, at least in the sense in which the development of an organism into an entelechy lacks the historical dimension of openness into the future. For this reason, and because of the static-Utopian notion of an ultimate state necessarily connected with such a conception, a lack of historicity might also be imputed to Rousseau and Marx.

sense that it applies to everyone (it is in fact merely dominant), and since, therefore, the system of social stratification is only a measure of conformity in the behavior of social groups, inequality becomes the dynamic impulse that serves to keep social structures alive. Inequality always implies the gain of one group at the expense of others; thus every system of social stratification generates protest against its principles and bears the seeds of its own suppression. Since human society without inequality is not realistically possible and the complete abolition of inequality is therefore ruled out, the intrinsic explosiveness of every system of social stratification confirms the general view that there cannot be an ideal, perfectly just, and therefore non-historical human society.

This is the place to recall once again Kant's critical rejoinder to Rousseau, that inequality is a 'rich source of much that is evil, but also of everything that is good'. There is certainly reason to regret that children are ashamed of their parents, that people are anxious and poor, that they suffer and are made unhappy, and many other consequences of inequality. There are also many good reasons to strive against the historical and therefore, in an ultimate sense, arbitrary forces that erect insuperable barriers of caste or estate between men. The very existence of social inequality, however, is an impetus toward liberty because it guarantees a society's ongoing dynamic, historical quality. The idea of a perfectly egalitarian society is not only unrealistic; it is terrible. Utopia is not the home of freedom, the forever imperfect scheme for an uncertain future; it is the home of total terror or absolute boredom.²⁵

25. These last paragraphs contain in highly abridged form – and in part imply – two arguments. One is that the attempt to realize a Utopia, i.e. a society beyond concrete realization, must lead to totalitarianism, because only by terror can the appearance of paradise gained (of the classless society, the people's community) be created. The other is that within certain limits defined by the equality of citizenship, inequalities of social status, considered as a medium of human development, are a condition of a free society.

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