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S O C I O L O G Y 2

EXTRA CREDIT PAPER

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Adalberto M. Lourenço
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A CLASSLESS SOCIETY...REALITY OR UTOPIA?

Many people strongly believe in the possibility of a large egalitarian, classless society. Particularly in Europe, not only in the eastern countries but also in some western ones, there are many apologists of socialism as a way to get to the perfect society: communism. I personally have been exposed to the arguments of the Socialist and of the different Communist parties after the revolution of 1974 in my country (Portugal).

Such ideologists based on the theories of Karl Marx, Lenin or Mao-Tse-Tung claim that a classless society is absolutely possible and necessary in order to turn the world more stable and make life more decent and pleasant for everybody.

One of their arguments is that there is in the world enough wealth and material richness to make every country and every person live in reasonable comfort. The only reason why it is not so is because such wealth and richness are not justly and equally distributed. A great majority of the people in the world live in poverty only because a very little minority holds all the wealth and power. Therefore, because the people included in such minorities are rich and powerful, they have more access to education, high social position and prestige. They make themselves "respected" as superior people because they are believed to be very well educated, very intelligent and influent in the destiny of the country and of the people

As a matter of fact, they consider themselves the support of society because they are the professors, the doctors, the lawyers, the judges, the generals, the governors... In ~~a~~ short ~~word~~, they are the "makers" of the ideology which evidently defends them as being the "gold" of society. Such ideology is transmitted to the lower classes through the media, cheap books and other means in such a fashion that even they (lower classes) accept the system as good, just and even necessary for the stability of society. Religion, too, helps to support the ideology with concepts such as that "this world is not important; the more one suffers on earth the more one will enjoy in heaven!" This is the reason why Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the people". In fact he considers religion one of the most influential agents of alienation. ^{- explain this -} All these means and ways of "educating" the lower classes provoke in them what Marx calls "false consciousness", which is defined as "a subjective understanding of one's position that does not accord with the objective facts" (Robertson, 1977:p.226).

Nevertheless, Marx and his followers believe that someday the subordinate strata will become aware of their condition ~~of a~~ exploited classes and gain "class consciousness" which will lead to "class conflict". Then, in a later stage, the people will conquer the power, divide the wealth, control the government and progressively eliminate social classes and establish the "communism" - the totally equal and classless society.

In face of such arguments, I think that they are ~~pretty~~ ~~much~~ realistic ^{with regard to} ~~in what concerns~~ the analysis of the present social stratification, ^{system} but rather utopic ^{with regard to} ~~in what concerns~~ the future of society. In fact, the experiments made in countries like U.S.S.R., Cuba, China, have not yet proved complete success, even though it cannot be denied that much has been accomplished in ^{comparison} relation to the capitalist system.

So, I would respond to the argument that a large classless society is possible, saying that it might be possible in a very distant future, but the whole structure of society would have to change, which undoubtedly will take a large number of generations. Besides, it seems very difficult, if not impossible, to usurp the wealth, the power and the prestige from the hands of the minority because they have all the means to avoid it, including the military power which is indeed one of the greatest means of mass control.

Indeed, what is proved fact is that so far all societies have been stratified and sociologists have tried to explain such reality. There are three main interpretations (theories) of social stratification: the functionalist perspective (Talcott Parsons), the conflict perspective (Karl Marx), and the evolutionary approach (Gerhard Lenski).

The functionalist theory argues that if stratification exists in all societies, it must have some useful function in

maintaining those societies. Their basic argument is that "there are some social roles that require scarce talents or prolonged training". Therefore, the people who perform such roles must be rewarded with some kind of wealth, power or prestige as motives for them to do their hard tasks. However, functionalists forget that frequently social status is inherited, not achieved by the individual, and that some people whose roles have no apparent value are highly rewarded, and vice-versa.

Conflict theorists regard conflict and interests as intrinsic to any society and Marx dared to argue that history is essentially the story of class conflict between the exploiters and the exploited. So, ^{an} ~~the~~ idea of ~~the~~ conflict theory, ^{in contrast} ~~contrarily~~ to the functionalist ~~one~~, is that stratification is not a functional necessity at all, though it is convenient for those who benefit by it - the exploiters (the minority). I personally think (as I said before in this paper) that this analysis is quite realistic, even though their predictions of the future are still to be proved.

The evolutionary approach is mainly a combination of the other two theories. It is based upon the idea that "people generally find it more rewarding to fulfill their own ambitions and wants than those of others". From that comes the struggle and the conflict, because most of the things people want are scarce. Therefore, the evolutionary theorists assume that a certain amount of inequality is inevitable and maybe necessary, but most societies are much

more stratified than they need to be. I think that this theory is rather close to reality and a very interesting interpretation of it. *elaborate*

To conclude this paper I will just cite Ian Robertson (Sociology, 1977:p.232): "Whichever view one accepts, one must recognize that social stratification cannot simply be taken for granted. Castes and classes are socially constructed in society after society by countless men and women. Since social stratification is socially created it must, in principle, be socially modifiable as well - provided only that people are conscious of their own ability to change the systems they have built".

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Adalberto H. Rouvenco
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