THEORETICAL PREMISES IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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Abstract

The study is a theoretical approach of the social stratification process, considered as an individual distribution in social units or in society in general, as an unequal distribution in social positions, a distribution on a hierarchical social scale, according to some subjective or objective resources like wealth, income, education, life styles. The social stratification study parts from the delimitation of social structure basic elements, like: social status, social roles, groups, organizations and social institutions. The second part of the study wants to identify, starting from the two biggest groups of theories (the conflict and the functional ones), which were the main norms used in society stratification studies, grouping them in two types: objective criterion (property, income, occupation, qualification, educational level, political affiliation, religious affiliation, etc.) and subjective criterion (social class conscience, value system, life styles, cultural and symbolic capital, etc.). The main conclusion is that we cannot talk about only one type of stratification, or that a value ranking would be possible. On the contrary, the studies based on social classes are more suitable for classical societies while the modern societies are using social layers stratification models based on occupational prestige and social-economic status.
Keywords: stratification, distribution, social structure, delimitation

1. Social stratification. Definition and description

Although the scientific concern for the society stratification studies is relatively recent (only from the XVIII century the European philosophers studied very serious the social inequality issue, even if the oldest written texts contain facts about this problem, also), this phenomenon was and is a fundamental and omnipresent characteristic of the social, encountered in the primitive and in advanced societies also.

A conceivable approach of the social stratification concept presumes a definition of the main terms used in this type of studies, and this is why we started from the identification of the specialty significance given for these terms.

First of all, the social means different types of association, of life in common, even if we are talking about various social groups as dimension and typology, institutions, organizations or social communities. Any social unit implies a special network between members, status networks, social groups and a certain ranking and structure of the component elements. *Social structure*, a fundamental concept used in sociology, designates `the assembly of the stable relations which characterizes the social system of one society,

consisting of the collectivities, classes, categories and social groups in a certain period of time.[1]

On the other hand, to attain its aims, any social unit benefits of the fact that the activities are organized based on an institutional assembly, behaviourism patterns, social action and social control agents, used to obtain social order and cohesion between the members of the society. [2] *Social order* represents the normal process of the social life, so it means avoiding disorders of any type (protests, revolution, meeting, etc.)

In these types of social models, the individuals occupy social positions (*social status)* and fulfil different functions (*social roles*), so that by their complementarity contribute to attain the aims that they are made for. Speaking about the daily usage, the etymology of the term *status* comes from the Latin designation for the word `standing`(position) and denominates the position held by an individual in society. [3] The status belongs to the social structure and represents the binding between the individual and the social. In sociological usage, the term of *social status* is seen almost always attached to the term of *social role,* meaning the assembly of expectations abducted from the social rank held by a person on the social scale.[4] The social status can be classified based on the its assignment characteristics: a) *the assigned status,* which designates the social positions starting with the moment of birth and it remains unchanged for the rest of one`s life (sex, age, etc.); b) *the obtained status* on the base of the changes in ones life as a result of his/hers actions (occupation, income, etc.).[5]

Another concept used in social mobility and stratification studies is that of *social layer,* denoting groups of persons or social positions existing on the same level of the hierarchy[6] (for example, the individuals like `liberal occupations: doctors, lawyers`).

In the studies of social mobility and stratification the term of *social class* is very used, concept that is appears very specific and synthetized in Marx`s social classes theory. For differentiation and identification of different social classes, the main role is held by economic criterion – property relevance. So, the social classes represent social macro-groups in the context of social stratification, caused by economic norms. Disconnecting itself from the Marxism theory and enlarging the category of norms that form a base for social differentiation, the American sociology understands by social class any social group and, especially status grouping. [7]

As a general approach, the *social stratification* phenomenon represents the individual or group location in a social position assembly, ranked on a vertical scale. [8] So, when we talk about social stratification we start from the presumption that in any social group the persons hold different social position, being unequal[9], not only regarding the natural characteristics (intelligence, health, the skin or eye colour...), but also regarding social characteristics (profession, behaviour, income, life style, etc.). The individual natural

1 Mărginean, I., 2000, *The Middle Class in Ex-communist Countries*, in „The Journal of Social Research", Bucharest, nr. 3-4
2 Mihăilescu, I. (2003), *General Sociology. Fundamental Concepts and Case Studies*, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi
3 Turner, S. Bryan, (1998), *The Status*, DU Style Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 25
4 *Idem*
5 Vlăsceanu, L., (coord.), 2011, *Sociology*, Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, p. 296
6 Rotariu, T., Iluţ, P. (coord.), 1996, *Sociology,* Mesagerul Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, p. 151
7 *Idem,* p. 15
8 Drăgan, I. (coord.), 1985, *Sociology. Theoretical and Practical Handbook,* University of Bucharest, p. 108
9 Rotariu, T., Iluţ, P. (coord.), 1996, *Sociology,* Mesagerul Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, pp.147-153

qualities matter only when the society offers them a specific value and importance, so if they are *social valued,* based on some exact norms, unanimous accepted, so the individuals are being advantaged or disadvantaged. Analysing the concept of stratification, implies also the presumption that the social positions (individual social status) are ranked on a *hierarchical scale,* from the lower ones (located at the basis of the social pyramid and being more numerous in the pyramidal stratification context) to the upper and prestigious ones located in the top of the social pyramid. So, the differentiation between individuals can be *horizontal*, based on some non-hierarchical criterion and *vertical* based on hierarchical norms, suggesting that among the elements of the society a certain order can be established.

Which are these norms, how we can establish *the social prestige of the positions held by individuals,* what type of social structure is specific for certain societies, are questions that have an answer in scanning the sociological theories framed in this area.

So, the social stratification designates a social phenomenon, the result of social inequality based on socially accepted norms, according to which the individuals and the social positions are being labelled as superior/inferior. This *vertical order* of the social status, having *inferior and superior positions* in the social structure context and *being self-consciousness of the position held in the social hierarchy,* are fundamental elements in the stratification study.[10]

2. Social stratification norms

Starting from the previous definition of the social stratification, as an hierarchy for individuals or social position based on specific socially recognised norms, it`s obvious that a basic attention of the sociological theories is that of identification of the *criterion* on the base of which the different social positions in diverse type of societies were classified. Our study will try to synthetize the main stratification criterion, identified in the fundamental sociological theories in this area.

a) Objective criterion (economic)

The conflict theories, among which the most radical is the Marxist theory, are those which analyse social conflicts, generated by human inequalities as a result of their reference regarding property. Thus, in Marx`s conception, in a simplified presentation, *the society is divided in two opposite classes* which are in a permanent fight, respectively in rich ones and poor ones, leaders and those who are managed/led, those who own the production instruments and those who do not own them. Between these two classes there are antagonistic and conflicting relationships. Analysing Marx`s theory we can say that the main canon of the basis of social stratification is the economic criterion, *property,* and the relation between the classes is an exploitation one.[11] But, at a most profound analyse of the explanatory layout, alongside the property criterion, Marx includes in his study also objective norms, like: *income source, political dimension* (power, political organization), and also *symbolical* dimensions (class consciousness).[12]

To considerate the changes that took place in advanced capitalist societies, post-Marxism specialists tried to redefine the class concept. Thus, contrary Marx`s foresight, the proletariat class became more and more differed on the base of qualifications. Dahrendorf analysed the rise of a new class, the middle one, which runs counter the classes'

10*Idem.*

11 Drăgan, I. (coord.), 1985, *Sociology. Theoretical and Practical Handbook,* University of Bucharest, p. 102-106

12 Cerkaoui, M., 1997, *Stratification*, in R.Boudon (coord.) „Sociology Treaty", Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, pp. 124-126

bipolar pattern issued by Marx. The capitalists' class was also affected by the changes, two types of roles are being much more delineated: that of the owners and that of the managers. In this case, the solution found by post-Marxism specialists was to define classes in term of *authority,* against the production instruments, and the exploitation is defined by larger terms, not only as a result of property differences but also as a result of differentiation in *valuable goods distribution.* [13]

The analysis of the social stratification phenomenon framed by M. Weber, begins from Marx`s theory, modified and much more elaborated. Thus M. Weber introduces in the delimitation of the social class, alongside with the *property and other important differentiations,* as *qualifications, abilities, the income level, job security, the market`s economic control, the availabilities that influence conditions and occupation types and especially the capacity to obtain the monopoly of some activities, services and goods.* [14] Weber interposes against the Marxist one-dimensional conception of classes, a multidimensional one, where the class rapport intersects with other types of non-class association, like *status and party.* [15] He believes that the next stratification elements can be found in one society:

   a) *social classes,* induced by using the economic criterion
   b) *social layers,* using the social criterion of social status
   c) *Political party,* using political criterion.[16]

According to Weber, *status society* is cantered on prestige and privileges obtained at the moment of birth, legally qualified, bonded by education, by a certain life style, stable values and by practiced occupations. According to Giddens[17], the economic and statutory position are, in general, correlated, the fortune possession conferring the person a superior status and conversely. Yet, as a principle, the two hierarchies are not overlapping, their autonomy generating significant *status contradictions,* meaning that the economic order, the life style and political power of individuals placed on a scale does not concur with their positions on other scales. We are talking about the newly enriched or of those impoverished, of those who get out of ruck or of those who are outclassed, that have suffered changes in their social and economic position without modifying the old manners, behaviour, life style and without internalizing the characteristic life style of their new social position. [18]

So, while for Marx the status differences are seen as class differences, for Weber, the status differences vary independent from the classes, being *specific and individual life styles that is by symbols (*clothing, residence, communication, occupation), which confers a specific distinction for a person among others.

The individual social status is observed by society through an assembly of specific elements, signs and symbols, like decorations, marks, national costume, etc. But, often, one`s status comes from the economic power or from the influence that one has in the society; that is why sometimes the term of status is replaced by a symbol, a mark. Thus, in

13Dahrendorf, R., *apud* Tufiş, A.P., 2010, *Structure, Stratification and Social Mobility*, in Vlăsceanu, L. (coord.), „Sociology", Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, p. 302

14 Cerkaoui, M., 1997, *Stratification*, in R.Boudon (coord.) „Sociology Treaty", Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, pp. 137-143

15 Burris, V., *apud* Larionescu, M., 2010, *Social Structure*, in „General Sociology Treaty", Beladi Publishing House, Craiova, p. 323

16 Weber, M., 2004, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Antet Publishing House, Bucharest

17 Gidenns, A., 2000, *Sociology,* BIC ALL Publishing House , Bucharest, p. 271

18 Cerkaoui, M., 1997, *Stratification*, in R.Boudon (coord.) „Sociology Treaty", Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 140

the sociological literature has been introduced the term of "blue collar", designating the persons who do a manual work, and the term of "white collar", designating specialists but without managerial positions in society. W. Mills, one representative of American sociology in social stratification area and the one who consecrated the term "white collar", was defining by this term the middle part of the contemporary society.

Rosemary Crompton, Gareth Jones (1984), Gordon Marshall (1988) and Braverman[19] are among other American theoreticians whom were interested in the issue of "blue collar" and "white collar", doing large studies and researches.

In the new society, the manual working class is in minority and the number of its members will continue to decrease as the manufacture branch will diminish. The old `middle class` differed a lot and the landlords upper class has almost disappeared. But there are *new occupational divisions,* generated by social and technological changes associated with the new economy based on acknowledgement and services.

Having a great interest for social stratification and the social classes theory, Marginean I., realized with his collaborators, studies about forming and composition of social classes in Romania, insisting mostly on the middle social class. From the estimations, it turns out that a percentage of 30-35 of Romanian population appertain to the middle class, while the lower class has a percentage of 60. Starting from the genesis of this class in Romania, from the Romanian society`s opening towards modernity (XIX century), from the precursors of the middle class – clerical people, craftsmen and factory owners, tracking the development of this social segment in communism period (in that period, the middle class suffered a profound degradation), Marginean I. focuses on the study and presentation of the rebirth of the middle class in Romania in post-communism transition context.

With the recurrence of the private property, in Romanian post-communism society appear the premises of the middle class rebuilding. An interesting aspect for this period is that of the existence of one new middle class – cultural bourgeoisie, intellectuality, specialists, and of one traditional middle class formed by the private entrepreneurs. [20]

An important influence in the composition of the new Romanian middle class, has occupation (correlated with the educational level) to the detriment of wealth. Now we can talk about a property bipolar distribution pattern[21], meaning that a very small part of the population owns a significant fortune, while the majority has no other properties except their house or apartment.

By occupational and educational norms, more layers of the Romanian middle class can be distinguished: those who have management positions, scientific and intellectual specialists, foremen-technicians, administrative clerk and the strategic employees in trade and services sector.[22]

One common element of the social stratification in Romania before and after 1989, is educational level. The majority of the present middle class is formed either of those who have a secondary and/or superior diploma obtained before 1989 or in the beginning of the 1990`s, either of the descendants of these who were or are part of a high socio-professional

19 Gidenns, A., 2000, *Sociology,* BIC ALL Publishing House , Bucharest, pp. 282-284
20 Mărginean, I., Larionescu, M., Neagu, G., 2006, *The Institution of the Middle Class in Romania*, Economic Pubishing House, Bucharest, pp. 115-120
21 *Idem*
22 *Idem,* pp.149, 150

category. So, the conclusion is that the present Romanian middle class has a strong cultural capital but has a low position on the economic and property scale. [23]

We consider very exciting and relevant *the new class structure of a post-industrial society,* issued by A. Giddens as a result of the analysis realized in advanced European economies (during 1995-2004)[24]:

1. the top group of this structure is a mix of *powerful elite with trans-national and national perspectives,* that can be identified in `global cities of Europe`; this high level consists of *cosmopolitan elite,* gravitating beside the Government, business and high levels professions, and representing in percentage the smallest sector of society;
2. the second level consists of *managers and high level specialists*, having a higher percentage than the first one;
3. the third level of the social hierarchy is occupied by *the groups that have advanced IT acknowledgements and „Apple Mac" groups,* that have risen in the analysed period from 20 to 24%;
4. the fourth level is occupied by the `connected` *employees, including office workers,* so, those who use the computer most of the day without being IT specialists;
5. *small business owners* are situated in the fifth place on the hierarchy scale;
6. the sixth place is occupied by a large category, *Big Mac workers,* meaning those doing routine activities, like: serving in cafés, markets, supermarkets and gas stations;
7. on the next place are *industrial workers;*
8. on the last place we find *the farmers* with a small percentage.

The political dimension, expressed in parties, in interests groups or bureaucracy, influences the social stratification, independent of class or status. If in the Marxist theory, the status differences and political organization are subsumed to the class, in Weber`s case the relations between the class, status and political organization are interdependent, without reducing one to another.

The neo-marxists (Paul Thompson, Olin Wright, Richard Scase, Val Burris, Adam Przeworski) have enlarged the Marxist scheme of social classes, by absorption of some weberian elements, like: the idea of the opportunities that are on the market; the authority and power relations theme, instead or next to exploitation relations; reconsidering the opposition between exploitation-domination and introducing some praiseworthy points of view (obtaining degree, qualifications). Neoweberians (A. Giddens, Frank Parkin) made efforts to correlate more accurate the structure with the action in explanatory social stratification theories. [25]

b) *Subjective criterion*

Another type of approaching social classes consists of considering them as simple statistical constructions, possibly placed on a scale. These approaches have a weak foundation in a social classes theory, but are widely used as practical measurement instruments for economic stratification.

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23 *Idem,* pp. 152, 153
24 Giddens, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 99-108
25 Burris, V., *apud* Larionescu, M., 2010, *Social Structure*, in „General Sociology Treaty", Beladi Publishing House, Craiova, p. 324

According to K. Davis and W. Moore, considered to be the promoters of the functional theory, stratification is a universal phenomenon meaning an unequal distribution of rights and obligations in a society, and the criterion that stands on the basis of the stratification is *prestige.* In their study, the specialists identify also the ways of establishing the prestige, by measuring the next dimensions:

   a) *the researcher opinion* regarding the prestige of the different social positions in the society;
   b) *individual opinion* about himself/herself;
   c) *ones opinion about others positions* in society;
   d) *the main opinion* in society about these positions.

Also, the authors sustain that regarding the determination of different positions ranks, exist two main factors:

   a) the importance of the social positions for the society, starting from the functional theories that say that *the stratification responds to some social needs[26];*
   b) education and personal abilities used for occupying these positions[27]

According to Pierre Bourdieu, whose theoretical contribution frames in conflict theories, the social classes are in an influence relation, exploitation, like in the case of Marxist theories, but in the first place, they are based on a *symbolic or cultural capital.* [28]

Another theoretician of social stratification that can be included in the functionalist area is T. Parsons, an American sociologist who considers that *the value system specific for every society* establishes the importance of the individual social position. Analysing Parson's theory, P. Iluț and T. Rotariu consider that it is not totally acceptable because `he moves the accent from the social positions hierarchy to individual hierarchy... that means putting an exaggerate limit to stratification area and a reduction of the issue`s firmness.`[29]

An important representative for the stratification theories is P. Sorokin, who considers also that the basis and the essence of social stratification consists of an unequal distribution of rights and privileges, influence and social power among the members of the society. The author classifies and defines the next forms of stratification:

   a) economic stratification that has these external signs:
   - *income separation*
   - different economic and existence standards for different social groups
   b) political stratification, designating the activity separation on the base of *the profession and main occupation*[30]

Anthropologists Lloyd Werner and his team were preoccupied by the social structure of an entire modern community and they have emphasised the importance of *the psycho-cultural and social agents* in the genesis of the social stratification as well as the economic position. So, the authors have proceed at a redefining of social stratification and they have realized `*a subjective approach*` of the class starting from the subjective evaluation of its members, based on *values, attitudes, beliefs* which frames the class prestige. Any of the five or six social classes identified by L. Werner in urban communities is characterized by a

26 Rotariu, T., Iluț, P. (coord.), 1996, *Sociology,* Mesagerul Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, p. 157
27 Davis K., Moore E.,1945, *Some Principals of Social Stratification* in *American Sociological Review,* vol.10, 2
28 Bourdieu P.*,* 1986, *The Economy of Symbolic Goods*, Meridian Publishing House, Bucharest
29 Rotariu, T., Iluț, P. (coord.), 1996, *Sociology,* Mesagerul Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, p. 159-160
30 Sorokin P., 1959, *Social and Cultural Mobility,* The Free Press, New York

specific life style, regarding objective factors (income, occupation) and subjective ones (personal taste, consumption patterns, family traditions, etc.). [31]

All these orientations present premises for concrete researches regarding social structure and stratification, externalized in building scales and other measurement instruments.

3. Conclusions

The social structure and stratification themes are reference ones for the sociological society study. If the term social structure refers to the way in which the society is organized, to the way in which individuals are placed in the social space, define their behaviour and interact, the term of social stratification designates placing individuals or groups in a social position system, hierarchically ordered on a vertical scale.

Understanding the stratification process presumes the definition of status and social role, presumes social valorisation of the positions occupied by the members of the society on the basis of socially accepted criterion, and also presumes the individuals awareness of these elements.

From the analysis of the criterion that different theories (especially the functional and the conflict one) adopt in determination of stratification systems, we retain the fact that, independent of the expressed preference for one or another criterion, all of them accept the necessity of combining the norms.

Even if, Marx generalizes the role of the economic agents, especially that of the property, it does not ignore the role of the subjective factors in the bipolar stratification of the societies. In postmodernists' vision, the concept of social status gains ground in the detriment of the class, which is established by using, alongside norms like occupation, qualification, abilities and life styles, materialized in social and familial behaviour patterns influenced by accepted social values, also the cultural or symbolic capital, the materialization of the social positions' prestige being the most pronounced tendency.

Every approach has a specific utility based on the type of the studied society. If the approaches in terms of class, which are particular for the conflict theories, are more suitable for classic studies of social mobility, the ones which use the layers stratification vision are more compatible for the modern societies based on occupational prestige and socio-economic status, and the definition of the layers, in terms of cultural capital and consumption patterns, is used especially in educational differences study.

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31 *Apud* 31 Larionescu, M., 2010, p.326

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