3 Founding ideas

Early accounts of social hierarchy saw inequality as natural and thus self-evident. But, by the eighteenth century, social transformations had led to growing disagreement about the nature of that social order, and an increasing awareness of the possibility – and desirability – of change. Social explanations of inequality emerged out of the collapse of notions of divine order in which 'social life and moral life were no longer inextricable dimensions of God's plan for humanity, but became objects of rational reflection and, in some cases, arenas for human design and intervention' (Shilling and Mellor 2001: 2). Part of this shift can be linked to the Enlightenment philosophers' suggestions that inequality resulted from the corruption of the powerful. However, the persistence of inequality in the face of political reform meant the re-emergence of accounts stressing the natural inequalities between people. Popular accounts saw inequality arising from a division between better and worse, good or bad, sorts of people (with the identity of these social betters depending on the standpoint of the observer), ideas which hardened into nineteenth-century scientific accounts of the biological inferiority of social subordinates. These views were rejected by the early sociologists, whose account of the socially constructed nature of inequality helped establish sociology as a distinct discipline. For them, social inequality was no mere reflection of natural difference, since the inequalities between people vary, and reflect the wider social groups, and time and place, in which people must live. The times – and the people who live within them – change. This chapter examines the contribution of these 'founding fathers' of sociology.

For these sociologists, the dramatic transformations of modernity revealed the mutable, inherently social nature of inequality. The classical writers explored how stratification emerges from the struggles between different groups, but they stressed that such struggles must be understood in terms of the wider social context within which they occur. Inequality does not just result from one group imposing its will upon another, as people's ability to act depends on external social forces which constrain them in various ways. People may not be fully conscious of these constraints, or of how their actions affect others; and it is the job of the sociologist to place individual behaviour in a broader social landscape, to reveal the taken-for-granted meanings underlying behaviour, and to uncover the orderly social patterns beneath the chaos of modern life.

Inequality became an area for academic study and theoretical analysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as classical sociology established stratification as a contingent, socially constructed arena. This chapter explores four key writers: the 'classical' figures, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and a later author, Talcott Parsons, whose ideas provided the foundations for modern theoretical accounts of stratification and social distance. In their different ways, they generated the key divisions which dominate current thinking. Marx saw stratification in terms of a class society, founded upon economic relations of class conflict. Weber placed much greater emphasis on stratification as the intersection of different spheres of power, but shared Marx's stress on stratification as a process of conflict and struggle. For Durkheim and Parsons, however, the order and stability of unequal societies had to be explained, which meant that stratification reflected shared beliefs about the value of different positions and qualities.

Class society: Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was not a sociologist but a political activist – he argued that we study the world in order to change it – however, his views influenced both academic analysis and political practice. Marx saw inequality deriving from economic divisions, but was less interested in the distribution of income and wealth, than in the economic relations (to the dominant way of organising production) which generated that distribution. Marx argued that subsistence – the need to make a living – was the most basic aspect of life which affects the whole structure of society. This *materialist* position argues that the material conditions of our life determine how we think and act, since

> the economic structure of society, [is] the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.
>
> (Marx 1859/2000: 425)

As Figure 3.1 shows Marx distinguished an economic base underpinning social relations, with developments in the economic base explaining social change. If this economic underpinning could be grasped then unequal societies could be transformed. But how exactly does the economic base affect social behaviour and explain historical change? Marx's theory argued that developments in the economic base give rise to conflict and inequality in the social system, leading to crises and, ultimately, to revolution and the creation of a new system.

Marx believed all previous social systems had been based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Under capitalism, for example, the proletariat, the great mass of ordinary wage labourers, are exploited by the bourgeoisie, the factory owners. The source of profit for the employer rests in extracting surplus value
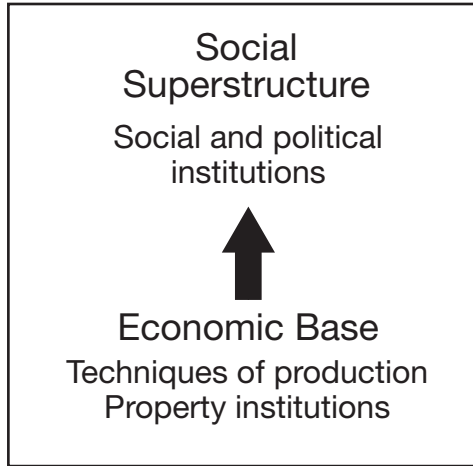
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│           Social                    │
│        Superstructure               │
│     Social and political            │
│        institutions                 │
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│         Economic Base               │
│     Techniques of production        │
│       Property institutions         │
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Figure 3.1 Marx's model of base and superstructure

(ensuring that the value of what the employer pays for the labour of the worker is less than the value of the goods the worker produces). For Marx, this is exploitative and leads to class conflict. As the economic system of capitalism develops, strains and tensions emerge. Together, exploitation and contradictions in economic relations lead to a revolutionary change of the system. Marx believed the same pattern had occurred in previous social systems (such as feudalism, ancient society, etc.).

Class-in-itself and class-for-itself

The motor of this social change is class conflict. Classes are economic categories, defined by their shared production relations and economic interests. Because the economic system is based on exploitation, the members of different classes have opposed economic interests and an antagonistic relationship. It is in the interests of the capitalist to force the wages of the proletariat down to the lowest possible level to ensure high profits. Employers have no choice but to behave in this way, if – in the cut-throat competition of capitalism – they want their businesses to survive. Of course people do not always realise where their true interests lie, nor do they always act upon them. Marx calls the people who share a class position a 'class-in-itself', by which he means that they fall into the same objective economic category but may never be a cohesive social group, capable of common action. However, under certain conditions a 'class-in-itself' turns into a 'class-for-itself': as members become aware of their shared interests, and act in a concerted way to achieve the same goals. If the proletariat, which shares the same objective, economic interests, becomes a 'class-for-itself', it becomes capable of collective revolutionary action.

Marx believed the economic development of capitalism was creating the

conditions for the proletariat to become a 'class-for-itself'. Revolution does not occur because people are poor and oppressed alone (indeed, it may not be the most oppressed who revolt) but rather out of a new economic order emerging which creates the conditions for class consciousness. Marx argued the economic conditions for socialism were growing in embryo within capitalism. Capitalism, Marx argued, produces a massive productive surplus, which meant that for the first time a decent standard of living was possible for all. Yet under capitalist relations of production (private property ownership and the exploitation of wage labour) a tiny minority had untold wealth, whilst the majority lived in poverty. For Marx, this was because the relations of production (private property) are at odds with the forces of production (industrial factory production creating enough surplus to improve everybody's standard of living).

The competitive nature of capitalist property relations undermines capitalist development from within, leading to crises of production. This is because the pressure for profits causes both a downward pressure on wages and the over-production of goods. Effectively, the poverty of the workers undercuts the market for the goods, meaning that they cannot be sold, leading to economic slumps. Marx argued that capitalist relations of production (private property) were holding back economic development and, eventually, this would lead to their overthrow.

Marx identified processes modifying the capitalist system from within, pre-paring for its transcendence by socialism. He saw a creeping socialisation of market forces, in the monopolisation of capital (the erosion of market competition) and the development of 'joint-stock' companies, that is, companies owned by share-holders ('capitalism without the capitalist'). For Marx this signified a trans-formation of the principles upon which capitalism is based (the individualistic pursuit of profit in the free market). Since capitalist business was increasingly centralised and concentrated, and run by managers rather than owners, Marx argued that this was only a short step from socialism, where production is com-munally owned and run for the benefit of all. All that is required in this model is for new socialist relations of production – the abolition of private property – to be declared, bringing the forces and relations of production into alignment once again. To achieve this the masses must seize control of the means of production and run them to the advantage of all.

Marx believed it was possible to transform a capitalist system, based on private property, into a system of socialism, with common ownership, because capitalism has already transformed itself 'from within'. Unlike previous trans-formations this will not involve the replacement of one elite by another. Instead, with the advent of socialism both private property and class antagonisms come to an end. However, there still have to be *agents* of this change who will take action to bring about socialism. Marx also sets out a model by which revolutionary action emerges.

As Figure 3.2 shows Marx's account of revolution sees social identity and consciousness developing out of economic relationships. A series of economic transformations result in the working class becoming a 'class-for-itself'. The
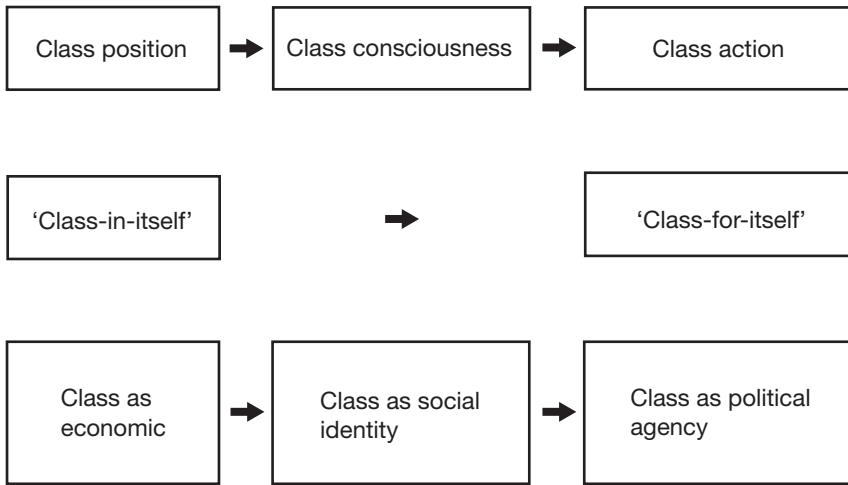
Figure 3.2 The Marxist model of class formation

intensely competitive nature of capitalism results in a 'boom and bust' economy, in which intermediate groups (the self-employed, small-business owners) are wiped out by economic crises and competition from big business. They 'sink down' into the proletariat, becoming wage labourers. Capital becomes concentrated into a few huge businesses which dominate the market, undermining competition. The capitalist pursuit for profit eliminates skill divisions amongst the working class, as all workers are reduced to the cheapest form of unskilled labour. The proletariat are homogenised, and also concentrated in larger and larger working units, whilst intermediate classes which 'complicate' the class system disappear. A polarised gap develops between an increasingly large working class, trapped in shared conditions of miserable poverty, working alongside each other in large factories; and a tiny group of capitalists, running a handful of enormous monopolistic enterprises. 'Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat' (Marx and Engels 1848/2000: 246).

These processes make the conditions of capitalist exploitation increasingly clear and transparent and, Marx believed, will lead to the working class becoming aware of their shared identity. The working class are transformed into a self-aware social group with the ability to act in their own interests. Marx's model is of developments in *economic* relationships bringing about *social* change. The simplification of economic relationships leads to people in the same economic position forming a distinct social identity and acting collectively. This is the classic Marxist formulation: class position leads to class consciousness leads to class action.

Marx's theory makes concrete predictions of social trends. However, time has not been kind to Marx and has revealed problems with his model. Class polarisation and pauperisation has not occurred, as rising affluence and the expansion of

middle-order groups has complicated not simplified the class structure; and class consciousness when it has emerged has done so in a very limited, intermittent and generally non-revolutionary fashion. This has cast doubt on Marx's *economic* account of social relations.

Spheres of power: Max Weber

The work of Max Weber (1864–1920) has had the greatest influence on modern accounts of stratification, partly because his theories explore the gaps which the passage of time has revealed in Marx's account. Although Weber accepts that economic divisions are an important element of inequality, he also sees other sources of social power giving rise to a very different picture of stratification. Weber, like Marx, believed that capitalist society was best defined as a 'class' society, but had a different vision of 'classes' as economic categories conferring similar life-chances. By 'life-chances', Weber means differences in opportunities, lifestyles and general prospects.

Weber argues that people's life-chances are affected by property ownership, but emphasises that occupational skill divisions (amongst the property-less working and middle-level groups in the labour market) also affect their life-chances, creating differences in incomes and lifestyles, health and welfare. He therefore defines class in relation to the property *and* labour markets, leading to a more finely graded view of class based on occupation. This more differentiated model opens the possibility of a large number of 'classes' – as many as there are different locations in the market. However, Weber resolves this diversity of possible market classes by distinguishing 'class situations' from 'social class'. A social class 'makes up the totality of those class situations within which individual and generational mobility is easy and typical' (1978 [1922]: 302).

Social classes are clumps of occupations with similar life-chances, linked by common mobility patterns. If people routinely move from white-collar work into managerial work in the course of their careers, those jobs belong in the same social class (because the people in them will have shared life-chances); however, if such movements are unusual, then those jobs belong in different social classes. Weber doesn't actually measure mobility patterns but, instead, using his own judgement of mobility links in the labour market, he identifies four distinct social classes:

- 'classes privileged through property and education';
- technicians, specialists and lower-level management;
- the petty bourgeoisie (small shopkeepers, self-employed artisans, etc.); and
- the working class.

However, Weber sees social class as a potentially unstable basis for social groupings (class-for-itself) since 'mobility among, and stability of, class positions differs greatly; hence the unity of a social class is highly variable' (1978 [1922]: 302).

For Weber, 'classes are not communities; they merely represent possible, and frequent, bases for social action' (1978 [1922]: 927). Marx believed that class position *would* lead to class consciousness and action (given certain tendencies in economic relations), Weber believed this *could* happen, but was only a contingent possibility:

> Associations of class members – class organisations – may arise on the basis of all . . . classes. However, this does not necessarily happen. . . . The mere differentiation of property classes is not 'dynamic', that is, it need not result in class struggles and revolutions.
>
> (Weber 1978 [1922]: 302–303)

Whilst people's objective economic class situation affects their life-chances, they need not be aware of this and may never band together to further their own interests. Because of this, Weber rejected Marx's prediction of class revolution. For Weber, economic position and social identity are not identical, so there can be no 'theory of history' based on economic class relations. This is partly because of the internally differentiated and unstable basis of social classes, but also because Weber believed there were other bases of association and group action which cross-cut economic interests and undermine the formation of 'class' organisations.

Class, status and party

As Figure 3.3 shows, for Weber, class is only one aspect of stratification. 'Status' and 'party' are distinct dimensions of inequality which – unlike class – *always* manifest as self-conscious social groups. Status is a phenomenon of the social order, and refers to the actual groupings of individuals: '*status groups* are normally groups', although 'often of an amorphous kind' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 932). As opposed to the economic determination of class, status is associated with evaluations of honour and prestige. The status situation of an individual refers to the judgements which other people make about their social esteem and which affect that individual's life-chances. We value many social characteristics other than economic resources, and these valued qualities can affect the power and influence that individuals have. Such value judgements 'may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 932), such as education, ethnicity, religion, gender, or even physical beauty or strength.

Status groups are people who share the same status situation (groupings which arise on the basis of ethnicity, religion, etc.). Status groups are aware of their common position and of their difference from groups of a different status, since status honour 'always rests upon distance and exclusiveness' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 935). Status groups show their distinctiveness by following a particular lifestyle – dressing in a particular way, or living in particular areas – and also by placing restrictions on how others interact with them. There may be restrictions on the sorts of friends or sexual partners that people may have and, at its most extreme form, status groups are distinct 'castes' – who only marry and make friends with members of the same group.

Party: a third, and distinct, source of inequality, refers to any voluntary association which sets up an organisation to achieve certain policies or ends (such as political parties, or even sports or social clubs, with more mundane objectives). Parties aim at 'the acquisition of social "power", that is to say, toward influencing a communal action no matter what its content may be. . . . For party actions are always directed toward a goal which is striven for in a planned manner' (Weber 1948 [1922]: 194). Parties mobilise members and resources to achieve common goals, and membership gives individuals access to contacts, resources, and a collective organisation, increasing their ability to achieve their ends.

As Figure 3.4 (see p. 48) shows in this *multi-dimensional model* of stratification the three orders of stratification are linked (with high status related to economic privilege and political power, for example), but are governed by different principles so do not straightforwardly map onto each other. An individual's stratification position depends on their *overall* location in all three orders, but their class, status and party positions may not be identical. So 'classes and status groups frequently overlap' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 937), but there are often discrepancies between the two. Status and class operate under different principles, with status concerned with 'honour' whilst class position is determined by the market. So success in the market may not receive a high-status evaluation: it may be seen as dishonourable or 'vulgar'. Weber suggests high-status groups will not allow high ranking on the basis of wealth *alone*, since this undermines the importance of status characteristics central to status stratification. He gives the example of the newly rich 'parvenus' who are not accepted into 'high society' because their education and lifestyle lack the necessary status, but whose *children* are accepted, once they have acquired the right schooling, accent, manners and style of life.

Someone may be of high status even if their economic position is weak (the impoverished aristocrat) or have low social honour even though their economic
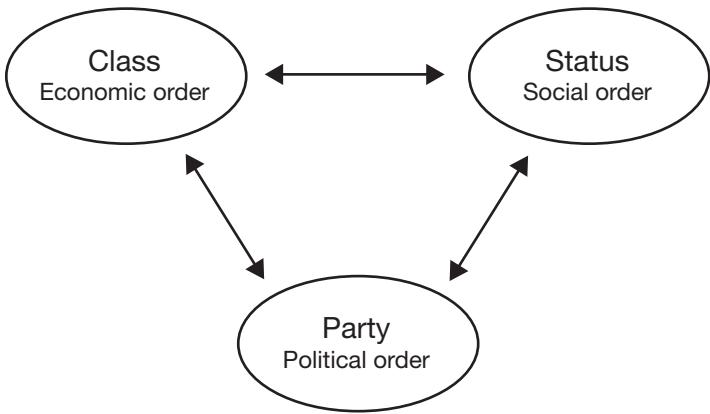
Figure 3.3 Weber's multi-dimensional model of stratification

position is high (the 'slum' landlord, or the arms dealer). Because status operates as an independent dimension to stratification, related, but not reducible to economic class, an individual's overall position can be improved by acquiring high-status characteristics (the right education or social connections) even if their economic position is poor. In the same way, party as a third source of power is related but irreducible to status and class. Parties may form on a class or status basis; however, this is not always so. 'Left-wing' political groups can have middle-class members, and the members of sporting or social clubs (the Rotarians or Freemasons) often come from diverse status and class backgrounds. Indeed, party members from humble class or status position use the contacts and resources of such clubs to help them access greater power and influence than they could otherwise achieve.

Table 3.1 Spheres of power: class, status and party

Class	Economic order	Economically determined market situation	Economic interests affecting life-chances – a possible basis for action	May give rise to social groups
Status	Social order	Social prestige or honour (lifestyle and consumption)	Social judgements of taste and prestige as basis of association and social distance – may be linked to class – but need not be	Actual groupings
Party	Political order	Political parties, clubs	Acquisition of power – may be linked to class and/or status – but need not be	Actual groupings

In this model, resources in one dimension of stratification can be converted into resources in the other two. As a general rule, high (or low) class, status and party position *tend* to go together: the rich tend to be powerful, the powerful to be wealthy, and access to high-status social circles tends to accompany both. But, as Table 3.1 shows, different principles of organisation govern the economic, social and political orders, so high status, or high party, position can sometimes be achieved without great economic resources (and vice versa). This is quite different from Marx's model, where social position and power derive from an individual's economic relationships. For Weber, the question of which dimension of stratification (class, status or party) matters most is historically contingent.

Social closure

Weber's concept of status entails the notion of distinct social groups, who reinforce their internal solidarity by drawing distinct boundaries (in intimate interaction and lifestyle) between those who fall inside and outside the group.

> Status relations revolve around the identification with a specific 'reference group' and its distinctive style of life. Identification as a 'member' of a particular reference group is the basis for exclusive networks of interaction within which social actions are geared to stressing the distinctiveness of its style of life. These actions involve attitudes of acceptance and rejection, recognition and denial, or approval and disapproval by others in terms of their conformity to the preferred style of life.
>
> (Scott 1996: 31)

This is similar to the distinct boundaries, communal relations and collective agenda that Marx envisaged for a 'class-for-itself', but extended to the status order. For Weber, status is always 'status-for-itself' – based on self-aware, collective groups – and this is bound up with *social closure*, the erection of social boundaries in order to restrict access to valued resources. This is Marx's model of class conflict extended to a general account of the struggles of groups over a diversity of scarce resources. 'He presents status groups as collectivities that mobilise their members for competitive struggles of all kinds, material and symbolic' (Parkin 1982: 97).

Social closure occurs as groups seek to increase the advantages of their situation by monopolising resources to their group and restricting access to outsiders. In the economic order principles of open competition are 'closed off' by groups who monopolise sections of the market, controlling the sale of goods or services. Occupational groups often monopolise the provision of a service or skill, preventing others from practising the trade unless they join the group by acquiring the right training, professional qualification or licence (which the group controls). And closure strategies extend to the political order, in bureaucracies, as positions become monopolised by specialists, who use 'expert knowledge' to establish their own power-base quite independent of economic resources (although they may use their position to command economic resources). Closure takes place in all three dimensions of stratification, and the resources fought over can be cultural resources, prestige, valued lifestyle items, acceptance into social circles, or legal, political and citizenship rights.

Monopolisation, for Weber, is a form of 'domination' (1978 [1922]: 943) and its purpose is 'always the closure of social and economic opportunities to *outsiders*' (1978 [1922]: 342). But to do this successfully groups have to have some form of economic, political or social advantage over the people they exclude. Social closure is therefore a process of *subordination within a hierarchy*, in which a group closes off 'opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as inferior and ineligible' (Murphy 1988: 8). Of course, excluded groups may also engage in social closure against the groups below *them*, so closure can occur between groups all the way down a hierarchy. Also, closure may provoke a 'corresponding reaction on the part of those against whom it is directed' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 342), as excluded groups erect defensive barriers of distance and exclusiveness upwards – restricting contact with the groups which demean and exclude them. An alternative reaction to closure is 'usurpation', in which subordinates try

to usurp the privileges of those above by imitating their style of life to gain access to the group, and by distancing themselves from groups at the same level (in order to appear more select and 'exclusive').

Weber's description of social closure (like Marx's theory of class conflict) sees stratification as the competitive struggle over scarce resources. However, Weber sees closure occurring in the social and political orders, in addition to the economic, with group conflict over a variety of resources, 'ideal and material' (1948: 190). Social closure is also expressed through a range of social actions, such as restrictions on friendship and intermarriage, by distinct consumption patterns and leisure activities; and through the 'symbolic degradation of "outsiders"' by 'residential segregation and physical expulsion' (Scott 1996: 31). 'In all these ways, groups are able to establish the distance and exclusiveness from others that allows them to assert and defend their claims to social honour' (Scott 1996: 32).

Weber's complex, multi-dimensional account provides flexible, 'history proof' conceptual tools for analysing a wide array of stratification arrangements. The current popularity of Weberian models lies in their adaptability. But, like Marx, Weber concentrates on stratification as the outcome of social conflict, in which self-interested groups struggle over valued resources. Whilst this is clearly a very important aspect of stratification processes, it leaves a fundamental question unanswered. That is, why is it that unequal societies founded on the clash of interests are actually so stable, orderly, and – comparatively – free from conflict?

Social ordering: Durkheim and Parsons

Marx and Weber are concerned with the divisions of interest and conflict between *the groups* in a society. However, another way of thinking about stratification emerges in Emile Durkheim's emphasis on the relationship between *the individual and society*, and how diverse individual interests are reconciled. Instead of focusing on group conflict he addresses 'the problem of order' (Parsons 1968 [1937]: 89), the integration of individuals into a larger social whole. This emphasis gives a very different account of stratification from that of Marx and Weber. Durkheim's own writings on stratification are brief, but the extension of his ideas by Talcott Parsons can be seen as a 'third tradition' in stratification, normative functionalism.

Durkheim (1858–1917) characterises modern societies in terms of their specialised occupational division of labour. The focus is less on inequality and conflict than on the functional integration that such specialisation brings. This is not because Durkheim thought divisions of interest were unimportant, but because he believed that economic divisions were always organised within a wider moral framework.

> He was as realistic as Marx in seeing that the economic structures were the dominant structures of industrial society, but he also believed that they had to be more than just economic if they were to produce social stability and integration.
>
> (Thompson 1982: 74)

Durkheim recognised that the labour market was an arena of conflict. However, he did not believe that stratification could be explained in terms of conflict alone, because he believed that order based on coercion always breaks down. If stratification is a stable ordering this is because groups *accept* their position within a hierarchy:

> although the vanquished can for a while resign themselves to an enforced domination, they do not concur in it, and consequently such a state can provide no stable equilibrium. Truces imposed by violence are never anything other than temporary, and pacify no one. Men's passions are only stayed by a moral presence they respect.
>
> (Durkheim 1984 [1892]: xxxii–xxxiii)

Durkheim argues that highly differentiated societies are integrated through a common value system of shared beliefs and norms. In modern societies, people are increasingly differentiated, with distinct functions, skills and different aptitudes. However, these increasing differences act to bring people together, creating interdependence and 'organic solidarity'. Durkheim saw society as a moral ordering, arguing that social institutions are a 'crystallisation' of a society's moral rules and shared values. Durkheim therefore believed stratification was also a *moral classification*, a status ordering reflecting shared values about the worth of different positions:

> at every moment of history there is a dim perception, in the moral consciousness of societies, of the respective values of different services, the relative reward due to each, and the consequent degree of comfort appropriate on the average to workers in each occupation. The different functions are graded in public opinion and a certain coefficient of well-being assigned to each, according to its place in the social hierarchy.
>
> (Durkheim 1972 [1897]: 249)

As Lockwood argues, 'Durkheim takes it for granted that in normal circumstances the status hierarchy is generally regarded as legitimate because it is based on a broad consensus about the "respective value of different social services"' (Lockwood 1992: 76). Because people share the same evaluation of the worth of different social positions, the unequal rewards of such positions are also generally accepted. Weber, by contrast, saw 'status' ranking in terms of the competitive struggle over resources, rather than any general agreement about the rewards due to different positions. In Weber's account, labour-market inequality is a result of conflict between sectional interest groups rather than the result of consensual moral rankings; certain groups are able to *impose* negative status rankings on subordinates, but this is a continual process of struggle, and is inherently unstable.

By contrast, Durkheim was interested in the stability of hierarchies, and argues that all forms of competition presuppose a shared moral framework.

Even economic competition (seen as the nakedly impersonal pursuit of economic interest by Weber and Marx) is governed by moral agreement by the parties in competition. People do engage in economic struggle, but they normally compete within certain agreed bounds (they honour contracts, and have standards of acceptable – and unacceptable – behaviour). For Durkheim, the stability of the stratification system rests not in coercion, but in the way in which such shared norms regulate ambition and competition.

> What is needed if social order is to reign is that the mass of men be contented with their lot. But what is needed for them to be content is not that they have more or less, but that they be convinced that they have no right to more.
>
> (Durkheim 1962: 242)

The wants and interests of particular groups are always socially regulated. That is, an individual's position in a hierarchical stratification system affects the level of demands they can legitimately make, and expect to receive. The claims for resources that groups make are always *relative* to their stratification position, rather than being completely unrestrained. So Durkheim saw the stratification system of a society as both 'the major structural embodiment of common values and beliefs and, more particularly, as major determinant of wants or interests' (Lockwood 1992: x).

> According to accepted ideas, for example, a certain way of living is considered the upper limit to which a workman may aspire in his efforts to improve his existence, and there is another limit below which he is not willingly permitted to fall unless he has seriously demeaned himself. [. . .] A genuine regimen exists, therefore, although not always legally formulated, which fixes with relative precision the maximum degree of ease of living to which each social class may legitimately aspire. Under this pressure, each in his sphere vaguely realises the extreme limit set to his ambitions and aspires to nothing beyond. [. . .] This relative limitation and the moderation it involves, make men contented with their lot while stimulating them moderately to improve it.
>
> (Durkheim 1972 [1897]: 249–250)

Durkheim points out that ambition is always relative, measured against the achievements and possessions of others, and that the sorts of comparisons we make depend on broader societal notions of fairness and equivalence. The moral regulation of wants and ambition is strictly contained within 'legitimate' bounds, maintaining the order of the status hierarchy. This means that the competition over economic resources, which Weber and Marx see in terms of conflict and power struggle alone, is also socially regulated, with ambitions and claims set relative to wider social notions of legitimacy and reference groups. For example, when occupational groups make pay claims, they tend to use the pay of

other occupational groups, who are regarded as roughly equivalent in skill or productivity, as the yardstick for their claims. Thus the pay rise of one group tends to be repeated step-wise throughout the occupational structure, maintaining the rank ordering of groups (Routh 1980).

Durkheim believed conflict occurred if a society's moral regulation was disturbed. So industrial conflict was the result of the 'abnormal' or 'forced' division of labour:

> if the institution of class or caste sometimes gives rise to miserable squabbling instead of producing solidarity, it is because the distribution of social functions on which it rests does not correspond . . . to the distribution of natural abilities.
>
> (Durkheim 1984 [1892]: 311)

This is the result of 'external constraint' which prevents individuals from occupying positions 'commensurate to their abilities' (1984 [1892]: 312–313). If people cannot compete freely for positions (because of inequalities in wealth or access to education) then the division of labour is 'forced' and will not lead to solidarity. Durkheim argues that the stratification of positions cannot be seen as fair and legitimate if the competition for *allocation* to those positions is not free and fair. Of course, a fair basis to allocation is itself morally regulated and subject to change. Durkheim argues that, in the past, birth and lineage were the legitimate basis of allocation, whereas, in modern society, skills and qualifications are the socially legitimate criteria of entry to positions (that is, like Marx and Weber before him, he saw the labour market as the key arena of modern stratification).

However, the forced division of labour is not the only basis for social conflict. Durkheim also believed that if the structure of legitimate expectations (the moral classification) is disturbed, then disorder will result. Sudden shifts in a society, such as economic disasters or an abrupt growth in power and wealth, can upset the moral classification, leading to 'anomic declassification' in which there is a mismatch between (formerly) legitimate claims to reward and the actual opportunities open to groups.

> Some particular class especially favoured by the crisis is no longer resigned to its former lot, and, on the other hand, the examples of its greater good fortune arouse all sorts of jealousy below and around it. Appetites, not being controlled by public opinion, become disoriented, no longer recognise the limits proper to them. [. . .] The state of deregulation or anomie is thus further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need disciplining. . . . All classes contend among themselves because no established classification any longer exists.
>
> (Durkheim 1972 [1897]: 253)

So conflict does not just emerge out of inequality, but through a destabilisation of the hierarchy of legitimate expectation. The moral classification, which sets

levels of social equivalence and limits social ambition, is upset, leading to more intensive competition and conflict. This helps to explain a puzzling problem faced by Marx and Weber: if stratification is based around competition over resources, why is there not more conflict in society and why does it only emerge at certain times? For Durkheim, this is because ambition and competition are regulated and always relative to position in the hierarchy: conflict emerges when this regulation breaks down.

Normative integration

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) also believed that a key element to the stable operations of a society are the norms which regulate people's behaviour. However, Parsons wanted to reconcile Durkheim's view of society as an external, constraining force with Weber's stress on the subjective motivations of individual action. For Parsons, the existence of shared rules and values allows people to know what is expected of them, and others, and to co-ordinate their actions in a predictable and orderly manner. Shared moral values channel the actor's behaviour towards socially approved goals.

For normative functionalists, individual actions become integrated with the values embedded in social structure in two ways. External sanctions (punishments and social pressure) enforce individual conformity with institutional arrangements. However, 'introjection' – where individuals internalise the values of the wider society – is more important. Through socialisation, individuals come to value the beliefs and behaviour of the society they live in, so that they choose to conform. Here the internalisation of socialised desires and beliefs means that the apparently self-interested actions of individual actors are, in fact, actions that reflect the goals of others as well.

In looking at inequality, Parsons is concerned with the *normative* character of such arrangements, that is with the shared values and expectations that they embody. Parsons's interest is in 'social stratification' which he defines as 'the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior relative to one another in certain socially important respects' (1954a [1940]: 69). Parsons sees the moral evaluation of others (through 'respect' and 'disapproval') as the 'central criterion of the ranking involved in stratification' (1954a [1940]: 70). So the hierarchy of positions is a status ranking, in which positions vary in their prestige and social honour. Whilst, for Weber, status stratification is ultimately a structure of power, for Parsons it is a structure of normative consensus. But on what basis are different social positions given a status evaluation? Parsons argues that we value a range of characteristics and resources, so individuals can be ranked on: kinship (family position); personal qualities (sex, age, personal beauty, intelligence); achievements (qualifications, skills); possessions; authority (the right to influence the action of others, held by virtue of holding particular offices or statuses, such as doctor or parent); and power (the ability to influence others in ways not institutionally sanctioned, that is, to get our own way regardless of others). 'The

status of any given individual in the system of stratification in a society may be regarded as a resultant of the common valuations underlying the distribution of status to him in each of these six respects' (1954a [1940]: 76).

Parsons argues that societies vary according to which aspects are most valued. In traditional societies, 'ascribed' status is the most important element in stratification, and kinship is the key (but never the only) element determining an individual's ranking. In modern society, 'achieved' status is the dominant aspect in stratification, and 'achievement' but also 'personal qualities', 'authority' and 'possessions' (insofar as they are taken as evidence of achievement) are the central elements in the evaluation of status. For Parsons as for the other classical sociologists, this means that the labour market is the primary arena of stratification in modern societies.

Of course, these different sources of status raise the possibility that ranking on one basis (say possessions) may be inconsistent with ranking on another (such as power), since they use different criteria of evaluation. The different dimensions may not directly relate to each other, so it is difficult to establish overall status position. When comparing one person's power with another person's achievements we may not be able to establish whose status is higher (since we are not comparing like with like). However, Parsons believed that a mechanism of 'interlarding' (1954b [1953]) 'allows status in one dimension to be "translated" into status in other dimensions and so allows comparison of relative standing to be made' (Scott 1996: 109). Money and the mass media (which establish 'reputation') serve as 'translation' mechanisms, establishing the relative equivalence of different status rankings. These serve as generalised proxies of overall social standing across dimensions.

For Parsons, stratification results from general *agreement* about which positions to value more highly. The positions we most value are rewarded more highly.
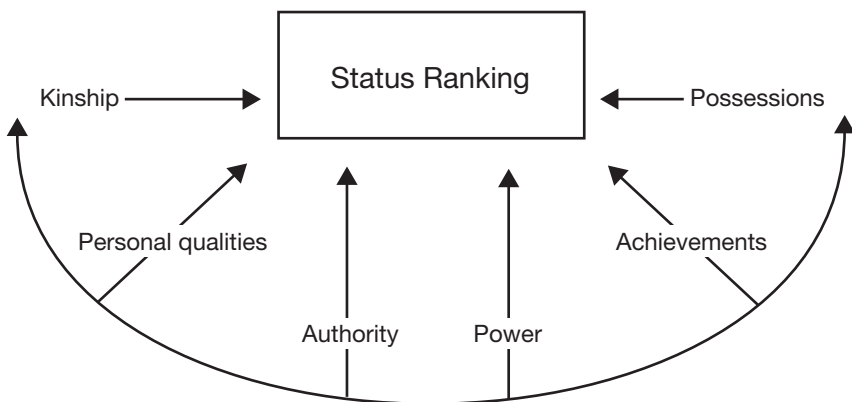
Figure 3.4 Stratification as status ranking

However, he recognises that the actual working out of stratification patterns is more complicated than this, since there is always 'an interplay [. . .] between moral patterns and the self-interested elements of motivation' (1954a [1940]: 73). People may not always agree with the general valuation of social positions, but

> if any given individual can be said to seek his own 'self-interest' in this sense, it follows that he can do so only by conforming in some degree to the institutionalized definition of the situation. But this in turn means that he must to a large degree be oriented to the scale of stratification. Thus his motivation almost certainly becomes focussed to a considerable extent on the attainment of 'distinction' or recognition by comparison with his fellows. This becomes a most important symbol, both to himself and to others, of the success or lack of success of his efforts in living up to his own and others' expectations in his attempts to conform with value patterns.
>
> (Parsons 1954a [1940]: 74)

People have little choice but to accept the general value placed on the different positions in a hierarchy. They may not like it, but – if they want to get on – they have to live with it and play by the rules.

Conclusion

This chapter sets out the basic elements of three very different models of stratification. The next chapter evaluates how the respective strengths and weaknesses of these 'foundational' accounts have influenced subsequent work. However, it is worth noting here that these strengths and weaknesses are intertwined. Their distinctive emphases (on the economic, on the multi-dimensional nature of inequality, and on the role of values) offer unique angles on stratification (a strength), but also channel analysis in a very single-minded fashion (and so, a weakness).

Marx's linking of economic relations to social identity, and his stress on the role of conflict in shaping society, has been enormously influential. However, his economic model has increasingly been questioned. The problem is that capitalist class relations did not erupt into conflict in the way that Marx predicted, and his suggestion that capitalist development simplifies class relations now seems just plain wrong. The rising affluence of Western capitalist societies and the growth of 'intermediate' professional and managerial occupations (neither capitalist nor proletariat) directly contradict Marx's prediction of class polarisation and pauperisation (Giddens 1981). Marx believed the simplification of class relations was an essential step in the development of revolutionary class consciousness, and so the absence of the former may explain the failure of the latter. But, regardless, advanced industrial societies have not experienced class conflict as predicted, so Marx's emphasis on class divisions as the defining aspect of industrial capitalism looks overstated. Of the conflict that *has* occurred, much of it has

not been of a class kind, and has instead revolved around ethnic, racial and religious divisions (Parkin 1979). Subsequent writers have placed greater stress on additional, non-economic, sources of conflict.

Weber's multi-layered model stresses the diverse motivations of social behaviour, seeing stratification emerging from a variety of social strategies and interests. Rejecting mono-causal models of social behaviour, he argues the links between material location and social consciousness are contingent. This is both a strength and a weakness. Unlike Marx, Weber is unwilling to make any *systematic* statement of the links between economic position and status, or status and party allegiance. But this stress on *contingency* as a feature of social arrangements means that Weber has no developed account of the *actual* (as opposed to the potential) link between structured inequality and conscious, cohesive groups. This can be seen in his account of status group formation. Weber argues that any status characteristic may be the basis of social closure: 'it does not matter what characteristic is chosen . . . whatever suggests itself most easily is seized upon' (1978 [1922]: 342). However, closure on status characteristics can never be arbitrary, since the status identifiers people seize upon must be systematically embedded in patterned inequalities (of power, status, etc.) if closure is to be successful. Yet Weber has no real model of how status *groups* emerge out of patterned social differences. Weber stresses the divisions that people themselves consciously choose to emphasise (rather than on some notion of hidden 'objective' structure). However, his reluctance to make determinate, systematic links means that he tends to underplay the relationship between conscious social groupings and differentiated social relations. This means that Weber is sometimes accused 'of being concerned with the world of mere appearances – patterns of social inequality and distribution – instead of with the real essence of things' (Parkin 1982: 94–95).

The normative functionalist approach to stratification argues that the regulation of the stratification system is based on a general agreement about rules and social expectations. This notion – that the stability of hierarchy inevitably entails a degree of consent and acceptance on the part of subordinate groups – is an important one. We all (whether high or low) rank and rate others in society, and this is an important part of stratification. Similarly, the normative functionalist stress on the regulated, relative nature of ambition and competition stands as a useful corrective to the emphasis on stratification as a structure of 'conflict' found in Marx and Weber. However, normative functionalism stands accused of underplaying issues of conflict. These criticisms were most famously levelled at the normative functionalist writers Davis and Moore (1944), who extended Parsons's ideas by arguing that unequal rewards are the means by which a society ensures that the most important positions are filled by the most talented individuals. Davis and Moore were criticised for ignoring the fact that stratification also operates as a system of power. Power inequalities not only influence access to positions and rewards, but also affect the distribution of reward itself. To see unequal rewards solely in terms of the best people getting the most important jobs underestimates the extent to which powerful groups can make sure they receive high rewards, *regardless* of what function they serve, or how they are esteemed.

Parsons and Durkheim argue stratification systems are stable because people follow generally agreed social rules. However, even normative functionalists accept that 'rule-following' behaviour does not necessarily mean that stratification rankings are *consensual*. Parsons's own notion of 'self-interested' conformity raises the possibility that large numbers of people in a stratification system might be pragmatically accepting the rules rather than actually endorsing them. Parsons sees pragmatic acceptance as less important than genuine value consensus (Parsons 1951: 37), because he regards consensus as a more central element in stratification than conflict or coercion. However, whilst it may be right to question conflict as the defining element of stratification, it is not clear that consensus (as opposed to acceptance) can be set up in its place. Parsons and Durkheim do not ignore conflict, and spend considerable time addressing how conflict arises in normatively integrated systems. However, they do see conflict as secondary and parasitic upon processes of social order and consensus. As a result, critics of normative functionalism feel that it does not give a *convincing* account of the extent and nature of conflict and, so, inadequately describes the stratification system.

The next chapter further explores the limitations of these 'foundational' accounts, and their continuing legacy (good and ill) for contemporary understandings of stratification.