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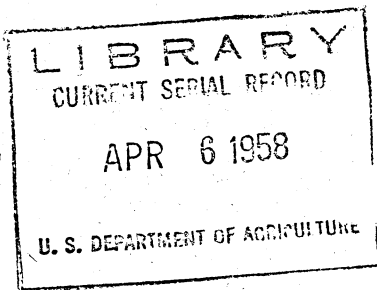
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## X THE CONCEPT OF CLASS

By

S. M. Shah

The concept of class was employed by writers like Plato and Aristotle, but the contemporary interest in class sprang largely from the Marxian theory of social evolution. Thereafter, the term is widely used but seldom adequately defined. It has been employed as an "omnibus term" to demarcate differences of various strata based on status, rank, wealth, occupation, income, level of consumption, etc., or on any one of these factors.

Much of the confusion on the exact connotation of the term has arisen because of the fact that the term class was shot through with historical, political and social connotations. In the course of historical development, new criteria for assessing the fundamental nature of classes have arisen to supplant the old, depending upon the determining forces in class formation at various periods.

For empirical research, such a situation necessitates a clear analysis of class attributes and their interrelations. Till now, class has been used as a research tool but too often in a "grab-bag fashion".<sup>1</sup> It is this situation that led Mr. Pfautz to remark that the concept of class has been one of the most ambiguous in the sociologists' vocabulary.<sup>2</sup>

It has been now universally acknowledged that "any organised social group is always a stratified social body".<sup>3</sup> In early times the determining forces in class formation have been social. Among peoples in the lowest degree of civilisation, e.g., native tribes, there prevailed a condition of almost complete social equality. Among these tribes there were no rich or poor classes, for, hardly any property existed such as would indicate differences in wealth. Further, any property worth the name was jointly owned and thus belonged to the whole community. Among the hunting tribes the distinctions were mainly on bodily strength of the individual. Man went for hunting and woman did all the "drudgery". With the ownership of female captives—which was an evidence of one's physical strength—the early ownership distinctions started.

Among the military communities of Sparta, there was a hierarchy of officials with different ranks, colours and dignities, such as, for example, 'The Peers' and 'The Inferiors'. As against this, distinctions based on political rights and privileges emerged among the ancient Greeks. In ancient Rome, economic differentiation based mainly on the ownership of land arose. Distinctions between the feudal lords and the serfs or quasi-serfs were pronounced. Classes based on land ownership existed in China after 350 B.C. But after the Industrial Revolution and with an advance in technology, division of labour and increased specialisa-

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Views expressed in this paper are author's personal views and he alone is responsible for it.

1. M. M. Gordon: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5 (1949-50), p. 265.
2. Pfautz, H.W. and Duncan, O.D.: 'A Critical Evaluation of Warner's Work in Community Stratification'—*American Sociological Review*, October, 15, 1950, p. 210.
3. Sorokin, P.: *Social Mobility* (1927), p. 13.

tion, new classes came into being. The nature of class thus differed at various stages in the development of the society.

#### CLASS AND STRATIFICATION

As Sanderson observes : "The significance of the term class varies from that of a mere category or statistical class such as the old and the young or men and women to one of the strong loyalties and a sense of exclusiveness".<sup>4</sup> From a theoretical viewpoint, social stratification is a special case of principles of inclusion and exclusion that are so characteristic of human behaviour. Within each class there is a fundamental equality—at least in one respect—but between them there is a gap which can only be bridged with difficulty.

All concur in the view that the concept of class deals with stratifications of a community but there is no substantial agreement as to whether classes are to be differentiated on the basis of subjective elements or objective criteria. Sociologists have often taken class in the restricted sense of "social class". There is need for considering class in a much wider sense.

#### *Aristotle's Three Classes*

Aristotle conceives of three classes of citizens : the very rich, the very poor and those being neither very poor nor very rich.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays it is usual, under Aristotle's influence to divide society into three "holes" or orders : the upper class, the middle class,<sup>6</sup> and the class of manual labourers. But these are broad divisions and such a classification is of little scientific value because of the lack of real unity among these classes.

#### *Marx's Conception of Class*

Marx based a division of the society on the 'solidarity' or unity of class. To Marx's mind there were only two historically significant classes—the property owner or the *bourgeoisie* and the propertyless proletariat. With Marx, class is conditioned upon and characterized by the mode of production. The propertied class, by virtue of the ownership of the means of production, monopolises the instruments of production and the other class produces the goods and the services. In outlining his thesis that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles, Marx emphasised the unity of interests, the solidarity of the group that puts them in direct action against the hostile group as the *sine qua non* of class and considered associational character of classes of secondary interest and probably as a derivative of their economic positions. His definition of class runs as follows : 'In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile contrast to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local inter-connection among these small peasants and the identity of their interests begets no unity, no national union and no political organisation, they do not form a class'.

4. Sanderson—Rural Sociology and Rural Social Organisation, p. 587.

5. Aristotle in *La Politica*—quoted by Nunez, 'The Social Classes'—*American Sociological Review*, Vol. II (1946), p. 170.

6. For a detailed discussion see G.D.H. Cole, 'The Conception of the Middle Classes', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. I, pp. 275-90.

Whether one concurs with Marx's definition or not Marx's contribution to the understanding of the concept of class is undoubtedly great. The merit of his analysis lies in bringing out one fact very clearly, *viz.*, that with the structural changes in society old classes are substituted by the new classes, new opportunities for oppression, and new types of struggles for the earlier ones. Another fact noticed by Marx is the division of society into classes based on the differences of property and the ownership of wealth.

### *Veblen's "Leisure Class"*

The basis of class distinctions according to Veblen lies in the "honour" attached to various pursuits. He emphasises class differences on the basis of "honourable (noble)" and "non-honourable (ignoble)" occupations to which different classes are attached. One is the "non-industrial upper class" and the other is the "industrial class".<sup>7</sup> The former he calls the "leisure class," that is, abstention from productive work. Veblen characterised major motivation of leisure class behaviour as "conspicuous consumption," "conspicuous leisure," "conspicuous waste," and undoubtedly laid the groundwork for a cultural analysis of class behaviour. Being an economist himself, he looked afresh at the behaviour of consumers, viewed them as buyers and consumers of a great variety of commodities and attires in their families and communities. His underlying thesis was that a person's consumption pattern or living standard is motivated by his status considerations and the desired effect is attained by socially "conspicuous consumption." This is possible because of their superior economic position, for, he remarks: "The basis on which good repute in any highly organised industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength"<sup>8</sup> and "the possession of wealth gains in relative importance and effectiveness as a customary basis of repute and esteem".<sup>9</sup>

Veblen lays stress on the inequalities of wealth prevailing among various classes. His distinction between the "predatory" or business class and the "industrious" or working class which is the "genuine producer" of goods falls within the economic category of class distinction.

### *Marx and Veblen Compared*

The difference between Marx and Veblen is that whereas the former made a prophecy of the overthrow of the capitalist society through class struggle, the latter took the division of society into leisure and labouring classes for granted and investigated the behaviour of various strata of the society. To both, wealth or property is an important attribute demarcating the classes but the characteristic feature of the "*bourgeoisie*" is the ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the proletariat, while the motive of the "leisure class" is "conspicuous consumption" for rising high in social status. There are no "hostile groups" with Veblen, there is no "class antagonism" between them either. Both Veblen and Marx emphasised economic as well as social factors in denoting classes. Marx too, for example, said: "Practically everywhere society was organised in

7. Veblen, T.: "The Theory of Leisure Class" (1924), p. 8.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 84

9. *Ibid.*, p. 28

a complicated system of separate classes and that there was a hierarchy of many social ranks."<sup>10</sup>

Though Veblen did not create a school of his own as Marx did, his influence upon writers beginning from Ward to Ross—The Fathers of Sociology—As Page<sup>11</sup> calls them—is undoubtedly great and significant.

### *Two Schools : The "Subjectivists" and the "Objectivists"*

The early sociologists from Ward to Ross developed two concepts of class with a varying degree of emphasis. One concerned more with the subjective elements of status, attitudes, feelings, class consciousness, and class indention, while the other accepted a Marxian framework with greater concern for economic factors or the objective elements as the basis. This disagreement on the exact attribute of class gave rise to two schools of thought—the subjectivists and the objectivists. Whereas with the subjectivists like Giddings, Cooley, MacIver, Warner, Centers and others class is determined by "class consciousness" or "like mindedness" or common "interests" of individuals, the objectivists maintain that classes—social or economic—are determined outside the consciousness of the individual. The subjectivists use class in the restricted sense of "social class," while the objectivists take class in the generally accepted sense as a group of individuals demarcated by economic factors such as wealth, income, nature of occupation, the place of the individual in the mode of production, his standard of living, etc.

### *Differences of Emphasis*

The difference between the two schools of thought is on the difference of laying emphasis upon one rather than upon other factors. A close scrutiny of all this literature will reveal that the subjective approach did recognise some of the economic factors and attempted their correlation with the formation of classes. MacIver, for example, writes : "We shall . . . mean by a social class any portion of a community marked off from the rest by social status . . . It is the sense of status, sustained by economic, political, or ecclesiastical power, and by the distinctive modes of life and cultural expressions corresponding to them, that draws class apart from class, gives cohesion to each class, and stratifies the whole society".<sup>12</sup> North's contention is also that "a social class usually connotes a group having a definite economic function, a definite rank and peculiar psychic characteristics as folk-ways and mores."<sup>13</sup> According to Landtman classes are marked off from each other by a sense of 'social distance' and they generally involve differences as regards income levels, occupational distinctions, etc."<sup>14</sup>

### *Reasons*

This different nature of emphasis is due to their search in the differentiation of classes of society in different historical periods. With the growth of capitalism,

10. Karl Marx: Communist Manifesto.

11. Page, C. H. : Class and American Sociology : From Ward to Ross.

12. MacIver : Society (1949), pp. 348-49.

13. North : "Class Structure, Class Consciousness and Party Alignment"—*American Sociological Review*, Vol. 2 (1937), p. 366.

14. Landtman : "The Origin of the Inequality of Social Classes", p. 37.

expansion of large-scale industry, and advancement in the technique of production, the economic element, chiefly the ownership of property, played a more dominant role than ever before in determining classes. There occurred a transformation in the class structure of the society. "The more purely social factors yielded almost entirely to the economic."<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact such changes modifying the existing class structure occur in a society at various stages of its development. "The grounds of discrimination and the norm of procedure in classifying the fact, therefore, progressively change as the growth of culture proceeds ; for, the end for which the facts of life are apprehended changes, and the point of view consequently changes also so that what are recognised as the salient and decisive features of a class of activities or of a social class at one stage of culture will not retain the same relative importance for the purposes of classification at any subsequent stage."<sup>16</sup>

#### CLASS AS USED IN FIELD RESEARCH

After tracing the historical development in the concept of class, we shall now attempt to examine how this concept has been used by research workers in order to establish the essential nature of class. In the United States of America where this concept has been applied quite extensively in field research, Warner and his associates, Centers and Chapin have done considerable work.

#### *Warner's Six-layer Society*

Warner and his associates while studying the "Social Class in America" have elaborated in considerable detail that aspect of society which Veblen stressed as a necessary supplement to the theory of class. Warner stratified the community of his study into six-layers in hierarchical order,<sup>17</sup> viz.,

- |                       |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) the upper upper,  | (4) the lower middle,    |
| (2) the lower upper,  | (5) the upper lower, and |
| (3) the upper middle, | (6) the lower lower.     |

His classes are essentially gradations of social ranks.

Warner's main search is to locate the individual in his class level. He and his associates maintain that people act in conformity with their personal ideas of social class, and not in terms of their economic position in the society in which they live. He maintains, "class is what some people say it is." Economic theories are thrown overboard because, in his opinion, they do not account for all the data to find out the individual's class level. Surprisingly, however, in his *Index of Status Characteristics (I.S.C.)*, he uses these very objective indices as a measure of socio-economic status of the population under study which he previously had set apart, though, all the while taking pains to stress that people in the community judge their class position or reputation in terms of social prestige or by "Evaluated Participations (E.P.)".

15. Paul Mombert : *Class*, Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, Vol. III, p. 334.

16. Veblen, T., *Op. cit.*, p. 9

17. Warner, Mecker and Eells : *Social Class in America*, p. 19.

His technique of "Evaluated Participations" remains a method oriented to the local community or to a community of restricted size where each participant is in contact with the other and knows his status. But such a method, by its very attributes, cannot be satisfactorily applied for studying the behaviour (or the features) of classes on a nationwide scale. Such studies have adopted more objective and easily defined criteria for studying the classes. Though Warner himself is not able to decide which technique is superior—subjective or objective—for measuring the class level of an individual, he admits categorically that members of a community evaluate each other, in part, on the basis of such status characteristics as occupation, amount and source of income, type of house, dwelling area, and education.

#### *Centers' "Psychology of Social Classes"*

Richard Centers' in his "Psychology of Social Classes" propounds a psychological theory of social classes. He bases his approach on the psychology or the attitude of an individual. Class, according to him, is entirely a subjective kind of membership. A person is mainly bound in one class or the other "only by his own feeling of loyalty and by his own interests and values."<sup>18</sup> But he too admits that these "beliefs and attitudes" are imposed by a person's status and role in his "activities of getting a living."

#### *Chapin's "Living Room Scale"*

Chapin, in his "Living Room Scale," takes into consideration effective income, material and cultural possessions, etc., of an individual while describing the social status of the people.

#### *Other Studies*

The National Opinion Research Centre (NORC), in its sample survey of Occupation and Social Stratification,<sup>19</sup> listed eighty-eight occupations. Each occupation was rated by the respondents on a prestige scale giving values from one to six. Dr. T. H. C. Stevenson adopted occupational classification in his study of fertility of different social classes of the population. The Population Investigation Committee and the "Social Survey" body followed occupation for grading the population studied by them.<sup>20</sup> In a study undertaken by the London School of Economics by Hall and Jones in connection with "Social Grading of Occupations," occupation was adopted as a basis. Here is their explanation: "We have introduced an occupational classification which we have shown to be closely correlated with the general conception of social class as judged by the samples of opinion we have tested. This occupational classification will be useful for working purposes, for example, to measure class mobility."<sup>21</sup>

Prof. Jenkins and Caradog Jones in a study of "Social Class of Cambridge University Alumni" of the 18th and 19th century have also devised occupational

18. Centers, R. : *The Psychology of Social Classes*, p. 27.

19. NORC Survey No. 244—Hatt, Paul K., *Occupation and Social Stratification*, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 55, 1949-50, p. 538.

20. Hall and Jones, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. I, p. 32.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

classifications.<sup>22</sup> Apart from these studies writers like Davis, Moore, Parsons and others have frequently pointed out the significance of occupation as a measure of position, though with differing justifications.

### *Indian Studies*

In studies undertaken in India in the 'twenties and thereafter, the orthodox method was to divide the rural population in various caste groups. This is evident from the studies undertaken by Dr. Mann,<sup>23</sup> Mr. Mukhtyar,<sup>24</sup> Dr. Kumarappa,<sup>25</sup> and others. It was only Calvert,<sup>26</sup> who, having in mind the term agricultural ladder considered the "Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab" in categories of two classes of owners and tenants. Darling<sup>27</sup> in his "Punjab Peasant" classified the population in four categories, viz., proprietors, occupancy tenants, tenants-at-will and farm servants, and subdivided proprietors according to large or small holdings.

The trends in recent surveys aimed at studying the social and economic conditions of rural population are increasingly towards accepting occupation as the basis of classification. It will be true to say that an increasing attention to various rural classes has been paid in rural economic inquiries during the war-time and thereafter. In order to find out the extent of rural indebtedness on the eve of the last World War, Dr. N. S. Naidu divided the rural population into five classes:

(1) big landowners, (2) medium landholders, (3) small landholders, (4) tenants and (5) landless labourers<sup>28</sup> and he significantly brought out how different classes have been affected in quite different manner as a result of the War.

In the 1951 Census, as is well known, population is studied by eight 'livelihood categories.' Of these, the agricultural population consists of the following four livelihood classes:

1. Cultivators of land wholly or mainly owned (Owners) ;
2. Cultivators of land wholly or mainly unowned (Tenants);
3. Cultivating labourers (Labourers) ; and
4. Non-cultivating owners of land (Rent-receivers).

The countrywide National Sample Survey<sup>29</sup> adopted the grouping of proprietors, tenure holders, raiyats, under-raiyats, share croppers, etc. The Rural Credit Survey divided the rural population into cultivators and non-cultivators. The cultivators were further divided into big, large, medium and small cultivators.<sup>30</sup>

22. Jenkins and Caradog Jones : *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 1, p. 95.

23. Mann, Harold H. : Land and Labour in a Deccan Village.

24. Mukhtyar, G. C. : Life and Labour in a South Gujarat Village.

25. Kumarappa, J.C. : A Survey of Matar Taluka.

26. Calvert, H. : The Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab.

27. Darling, M.L. : The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt.

28. Naidu, N.S. : Report of the Economists for Enquiry into Rural Indebtedness, 1946, p. 34.

29. National Sample Survey, General Report No. 1 on the First Round, Appendix 3, Household Schedule I.

30. All India Rural Credit Survey, Vol. I, Part (2).

The Agricultural Labour Inquiry divided rural families on the basis of sources of family income and divided rural population into four classes, namely, land owners, tenants, agricultural labourers and non-agriculturists. The agricultural labourers were further sub-divided into those with land and those without land.<sup>31</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The main line of thought that has guided these various enquiries seems to be as follows.

As man's income is largely determined by his occupation his income determines his standard of living and consumption patterns. Consequently, his occupation seems generally agreed upon as the most satisfactory index of class probably because it can be more easily and reliably ascertained than other indices. Occupation thus may be taken as a usable and valid index for most purposes for empirical research, both for nationwide studies and for studies of smaller regions.

The most common division of the agricultural population is a three-fold division into landowners, tenants and the labourers. The agricultural population consists of a social pyramid with several layers one superimposed upon the other. In this sense, the agricultural population resembles a stratified ladder and the various classes form separate rungs on it. At the very top of the agricultural ladder are the landowners, the labourers being on the bottom rung. This classification is accepted in the study of vertical mobility of rural classes on the agricultural ladder. In a study of dynamic picture of the rural class structure, the concept of agricultural ladder provides a very useful tool for measuring the flexibility and the currents of mobility of the rural population.

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31. Agricultural Labour—How They Work and Live, p. 53.