

THOUGHTS ON THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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'Social Stratification' and 'Stratified Society'

Stratification is a central issue in the theory of social evolution, especially in relation to the development of state-level society. Most theoreticians acknowledge that state-level organisation entails the presence of social classes; it is concerning the nature and formation of these classes that their opinions differ.

There are three commonly met characterisations of stratified society. The first is based on genealogical distinctions between two classes, aristocrats and commoners. In this characterisation, the progression from ranked to stratified society is achieved when a society all of whose lineages are ranked in order of genealogical distance from a common ancestor, suddenly splits into two groups, an upper group among whom ranked orderings and genealogical connections are maintained, and a lower group with whom all vertical ties disappear and whose relations to the ancestors are lost, blotted out. No statements have been made as to the mechanism for this transformation or the time involved in achieving it. There is, therefore, no identifiable process of stratification in this characterisation, just the contrastive result between ranked and stratified society. A second characterisation involves the recognition of two sociopolitical classes, the governors and the governed (Service 1975:xiii). As for the mechanism for stratification, Service states that the "governors created themselves ... rather than having been the creation of others" (1975:xiii), and that "the creation and extension of the authority bureaucracy was also the creation of the ruling class" (1975:285). The third characterisation of stratified society is espoused by Fried in terms of socio-economic classes: "A stratified society is one in which members of the same sex and equivalent age status do not have equal access to the basic resources that sustain life" (Fried 1967:186). By this view, the process of stratification is "the development of differentiated rights of access to basic resources" (Fried 1967:191).

At present, there is considerable debate among the proponents of these different definitions as to which definition should be given priority and whether class society in general is a product of integrative processes or the outcome of social conflict (Service 1975, 1978; Fried 1978). These arguments are interesting in the context of early state development; for the moment, however, I would like to put them aside and look at even more basic aspects of stratification which because of their unresolved nature may be obscuring our understanding of higher level processes.

In the above presentation, I have used the terms 'stratification' and 'stratified society' for heuristic reasons as referring to two aspects of a single phenomenon: the process (stratification) and the

result of that process (stratified society). Is this distinction justified? We often speak of the 'process of stratification', but by dictionary usage the term 'stratification' can also apply to a state of being, i.e. it is interchangeable with 'stratified society', and many authors do use it in this way. Therefore, statements containing the word 'stratification' are unclear as to whether it is being used as a static or as a processual term. For example, Earle (1977) talks about the "evolution of social stratification", and Friedman and Rowlands (1977:213) speak of a "minimal development of class stratification". Do these mean that stratification evolves through time, that the society has embarked upon the process of social stratification, or that stratified society is present but in a somehow incomplete form? The basic questions here concern quantitative and qualitative change and the distinction between a process and its result.

It is probably fair to say that most theoreticians think class society is qualitatively different from ranked society. If we retain the distinction mentioned above between process (stratification) and qualitative result (stratified society), then an implication of this mode of thinking is that stratification processes occur in the context of non-stratified society and that nothing but the full result of the process can be called stratified society. The model entailing these distinctions is given in Figure 1.

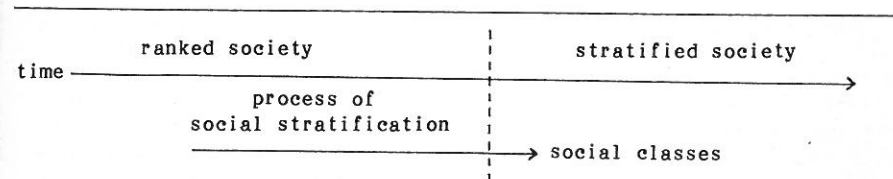


Figure 1: Model 1.

This model does not specify whether the changes occurring during stratification are qualitative or quantitative but only that the result is qualitatively different from the previous situation.

On the other hand, there are tendencies in the literature to speak of stratification in incremental terms. Friedman and Rowlands' "minimal development of class stratification" quoted above is one manifestation of this tendency, as is Service's description of Fried's ethnographic examples as cases of "incipient" stratification" (Service 1975:285). These statements imply that stratified society exists from the moment the process of stratification begins and that the process itself consists of graduated, incremental and quantitative change. These distinctions are modelled in Figure 2.

In this second case, what is the qualitative change that sets off the quantitative process? Is fully stratified society to be differentiated from incrementally stratified society (whatever these mean)? And how

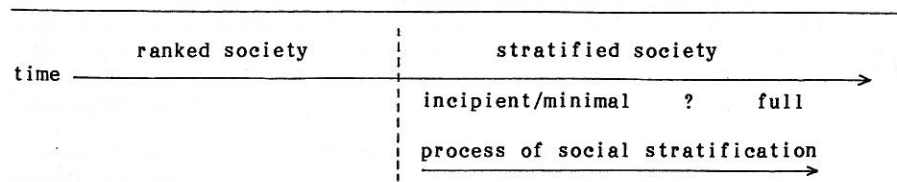


Figure 2: Model 2.

is process to be distinguished from result? Regarding the first model, we could also ask whether the process of stratification ceases once stratified society is achieved. From the moment of separation of society into classes, are the natures of those classes fixed or are they mutable? Do they also undergo transformations in time, and can these transformations also be subsumed under the 'term process of stratification'? For example, if initial stratified society consists only of two classes, can further stratification produce five classes? And if we grant that stratification processes occur within stratified society (as indeed they do according to model 2), would it be more appropriate to speak of processes within ranked society leading to stratified society as processes of social differentiation rather than stratification?

These questions indicate how nebulous the concept of stratification is and how loosely it is used even in contexts to which it is crucial. By concentrating on the objectified relationships between classes and the idea of 'class' as a holistic unit of society, we are at once obscuring the very process of class formation that we are trying to elucidate. On an empirical basis, I favour an approach that provides for the continuation of stratification processes through time, resulting in a series of qualitative transformations and hierarchical orderings of social groups whose natures change with time. In other words, I am suggesting that stratification is worthy of attention as a process in and of itself rather than being merely a typological device for separating societies off into categories for the analysis of growth in other dimensions. Once the view is taken that stratification is a continuing and ongoing process, the archaeological record can be examined for operationally defined stages or levels of stratification. Japanese data very much suggest that the three basic characterisations of stratified society are not mutually exclusive, as presented by their authors, but may represent different stages in the process of social stratification.

Stages of Social Stratification Attested in Mounded Tomb Assemblages

Vast differences in status of individuals within protohistoric Japanese society are first attested archaeologically by the interment of some persons in large mounded tombs accompanied by elaborate grave goods. Japanese archaeologists equate the advent of mounded tomb burial with the emergence of a class of rulers, testified by the material emblems of authority in the grave goods assemblage: bronze mirrors,

jasper staves, jasper bracelets, jade *magatama* beads, and iron swords, weapons and armour. Their interpretations are partly ethnohistorical in nature, since the mirror, sword and *magatama* have been recognised as imperial insignia from the dawn of historical recording. Thus, the Japanese assessment of the political significance of the mounded tomb assemblages matches Service's definition of stratification as the creation of a ruling class.

Fried's definition of stratification, on the other hand, proves to be less appropriate to this particular point in Japanese social development. To be sure, the building of the mounded tombs required the commandeering of great quantities of labour, and the deposited grave goods embody access to scarce commodities and specialist or time-consuming manufacture. But none of these resources can legitimately be viewed as 'basic' or 'strategic'. The most concrete example of what Fried means by differential access to strategic resources is from historic Ur III society in Mesopotamia. In that context he identifies 'strategic resources' as "arable land, housing sites and housing, agricultural tools, domestic animals, wagons and boats, feed grains, and various media of exchange" (Fried 1978:41).

The commandeering of these kinds of resources is most definitely not attested in the early Japanese tomb data. The tombs themselves were built in upland, not lowland, areas and therefore did not affect the amount of available arable. Basic foodstuffs were not appropriated for deposition in the tombs, and housing sites were not usurped.

However, for the late protohistoric period, three centuries after the advent of mounded tomb building, we can see the development of differential access to these resources essentially as Fried has described it. The settlement form of shifting palace sites reflects decision-making powers over land use: the ability to appropriate freely common land for private use was a privilege of these latter-day elites. The extraction of taxes from the rural population -- possibly to the extent of depriving them of adequate nourishment -- was a concomitant development. Here indeed we see the extension of elite appropriation to 'basic strategic resources'.

These data lead us to ask whether socio-economic classes, as Fried has described them, are not *products* of a long process of social stratification rather than the cause or the characterisation of that process. Socio-economic classes include all ages and sexes of a certain segment of society, and they manifest themselves through a domestic life style, pervading all hours of the day rather than one confined to certain activities or times.

By contrast, the nature of the 'elite class' at the beginning of the process of social stratification is very limited in scope. Only particular individuals were granted preferential burial, and families were apparently not included. The complete absence in the settlement record of the types of goods deposited in graves indicates that such

goods were not part of a 'life style' but were confined to use in a very small segment of social life. The objects themselves are not subsistence-related; they are luxury goods with high symbolic content.

I question, therefore, the appropriateness of the use of the term 'social class' for the products of the early stages of stratification. Social classes as they were originally defined in the sociological sciences are mere statistical collections embodying diverse groups with different interests. The utility of the concept of social class is currently being challenged for many avenues of inquiry (Cohen 1981). Classes are being replaced as foci of study by emphasis on particular interest groups. This approach may be useful in studies of social evolution, where stratification can be characterised as the coming into existence of a hierarchy of homogeneous interest groups.

The first stages in this process may well follow the model established by Friedman and Rowlands with reference to the formation of closed marriage classes based on social rank. That this is the mechanism that fosters the genealogical separation into aristocrats and commoners is a logical possibility. Thus the first of the three commonly held definitions of stratification cited above could apply to the earliest manifestation of hierarchical layering of social groups. The emergence of a specific group of rulers would be the second manifestation. The rulers of this stage (corresponding to the period of the earliest mounded tombs in Japan) do not stand out as merely contrastive with the rest of the populace in each local polity but form the first supralocal interest group within the framework of social development. The specifically politico-ritual nature of the material correlates of these leadership positions indicates the special-interest dimension of the group's identity. It is inappropriate to speak of this kind of group as a social class, since no related individuals -- either spouses or children -- share the politico-ritual function of the leadership roles even though they may share the high status of the ruling individuals. Following the definition of ruling individuals, we should expect to see the emergence of a series of special-function groups -- craft, military etc. It is not until the very end of the sequence, after the advent of market economies, that socio-economic 'classes' appear. These are demarcated by the development of distinct life styles with truly mass followings: 'class' and 'group' imply vastly different numerical scales.

The succession which I have described here leads us to the recognition of social stratification as an ongoing process rather than a single event. One consequence of this redefinition is that successive stages or degrees of social divergence can be identified which have different characters yet can all be subsumed under the term 'stratification'. This consequence necessitates greater precision in specifying what level of stratification, along with its material correlates, is being discussed in any particular analysis or review. But with the recognition of the greater possibilities of meaning assigned to stratification, perhaps some of the ambiguity in the term's usage will disappear.

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