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**Stratification and Political Integration in Bourdieu's
Perspective**
(a seminar essay)

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Many stratification theories exist and their authors vary on the constructive units of society. They also disagree on the point if the specific units constitute a continuum or are separated by gaps. However, they all create categories according to which people think and act. These individual categories are made of people with similar interests. Bourdieu uses the term habitus for these similar material conditions and the way they affect the lifestyles of individuals. What is important to realize is that it is not only the economic position that is important in the stratification theory. The issue the author would like to discuss in this paper is the integration mechanism of a society that includes these distinct groups into a functioning and coherent society known as a modern state. The core of this paper consists of some of Bourdieu's thesis presented mainly in "Distinction". These are put in the context of thesis of other authors, namely Collins and Parsons.

Let us start with the main point making the stratification theory so appealing to social scientists. This theory helps to understand conflicts in society as well as their resolutions. Stratification theory indicates that society is divided into groups, which have different interests and views over the social world, moral or political order etc. These groups (or as a matter of fact their representatives) are interested in such positions that would provide them with enough power to impose their own understanding of the social world on the society (Bourdieu, 1991). Only this symbolic power enables them to gain rewards from imposing their views as universal ones. Parsons (1971) specifies these rewards as an influence that can be exchanged for ad hoc benefits, money or other rewards. However, it would be an inadmissible narrowing to consider stratification important only for economic reasons. Bourdieu uses the term habitus to show that a position in society is connected to everyday practices of individuals, which form the thoughts of these individuals. Then their participation in political field arises from "*systematic schemes of thought and action, acquired by simple familiarization ... and applied in pre-reflexive mode*" (Bourdieu, 1996: 418). The class ethos consists of complex practices and so the interests cannot be viewed only as economy-driven.

Moreover, as it comes to the conflict and its resolution, only those with political (symbolical) power can use their influence to prevent the complete disintegration of society. In other words, those with political power have the possibility to bring certain integration mechanisms to life. In this context different positions in society mean also an unlike access to political power. The distinct groups constituting society have dissimilar interests and also abilities to make their voices being heard. According to Bourdieu (1996) the main difference among various groups lies in the level of educational capital. The political field, as all the other fields, has its own logic and requirements. It uses a specific abstract language and so political problems are expressed in it. To produce or understand this language requires special training. And a very important thing is that only some people can gain this training. This specific education can be provided only to some – that is to say to the upper class. Therefore not everyone has the opportunity to take part in articulating political problems and the standpoints of various groups in the society.

Bourdieu as well suggests that an issue becomes political once it is presented as political. So the everyday question of a social world becomes political when it is put into the abstract language of politics and introduced by a person obliged to introduce political issues. In this way politics becomes a game in which all the participants are interested in their best performance according to the rules of the field without any specific calculation in mind (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus a group of professionals involved in and concerned about the articulation and formulation of interests and needs of specific groups of society is found. Professionals then speak in the name of non-professionals they claim to represent. To be successful they have to be trained to represent the particular group so persuasively that its members can identify with “their” needs as presented by the speaker or the body behind him (proxy). In other words, they have to know how to mobilize possible voters. In this way they create the group and so “*they contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate*” (Bourdieu, 1991: 220). Consequently, the individual can either make his/her own opinion or can rely on the one produced by professionals.

Despite the dissimilar conditions of various groups in the society their members “*emphasize the virtue of their own life situation*” when judging decisions and ideas (Collins, 1975: 71). As different life situations bring about unlike interests, distinctive attitudes towards political life by individual societal groups are apparent. The upper class (as the one trained to meet the requirements of the political field) under the described circumstances profits the most from a stable situation (Bourdieu, 1996). This class has gained its power thanks to comprehension of the abstract rhetoric of politics (Collins, 1975). On the other hand, the lower class with no corresponding training needs “translation” of the abstract language. They have to understand the abstract issues as attached to their own life experience. If the political representative is not able to introduce this translation in his speech, then he is not able to mobilize these voters who show no interest in subjects not known to them. Moreover Bourdieu (1996) claims that for all social categories except for the mentioned upper class the class ethos becomes more important than declared political opinion. Thus without re-appropriation of the political issues to the life experiences of voters, no political agent can achieve support from classes other than the upper class.

Most of society is not formed of the upper class, however. For a society to work properly and be coherent and so stable a mechanism ensuring loyalty of all the members becomes important. Those in power, those proposing binding decisions, those able to impose their views on the social world have to make their own interests look like collective or universal ones. Only by presenting particular interests as universal, individuals can internalize them and so help to establish the power of the upper class. As this power is articulated as being in the collective interest it binds the loyalty of citizens who can identify with collective values formulated like this. Only then the individual can also have a sense of having power. As Parsons (1971: 17) points out “*a citizen exercises power when he casts his vote because the aggregate of votes bindingly determines the electoral outcome. Only a little power still is a power (...)*”. People with diverse interests can be integrated into a coherent society by this mechanism.

Resources

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