

Indigenous Capitalist Class, Social Stratification and Life Chances in the Contemporary Nigeria Society

Oladele A. Adeleke^{1*}, Rasak Bamidele², Rasaq Omokeji, Ganiyu³

1. Department of Sociology, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State

E-mail: Adelekeola01@yahoo.com

2. Department of Sociology and Psychology, Fountain University Osogbo, Osun State

E-mail: delerasak@yahoo.co.uk

3. Department of Sociology, Fountain University, Osogbo, Osun State

E-mail: mrgemum@yahoo.com

Abstract

The life styles associated with people in the same class categories include, among other things, particularly orientations to manners, speech, clothing styles, education and especially, ‘Success’. There is a tendency for people with similar styles to participate together in both formal and informal groups, to marry one another, and to choose activities that reflect their similar value orientations. Social stratification draws attention to the unequal positions occupied by individuals in society. Social inequality is found in all societies. Therefore, this paper is to examine social stratification, life chances in relation to indigenous capitalist class in Nigeria. This study will be guided by the Weberian perspective of social stratification.

Keywords: Social Stratification, Indigenous Capitalist Class, Life Chances, Social Inequality and Social Mobility

Introduction

In every human society, there are inequalities even in the smallest culture, where variations in wealth or property virtually none existent, there are inequalities between individuals, men and women, the young and the old. A person may have a higher status than others because of particular prowess at hunting for instance or because he/she is believed to have special access to ancestral spirits. To describe inequalities, sociologists talk about social stratification. Social stratification therefore is structured inequalities between different groupings of people. Society can be defined as consisting of strata in a hierarchy. There are four basic system of stratification which are Slavery, Caste, Estate and Class

Slavery: Is an extreme form of inequality in which some individuals are literally owned by others as property. The legal condition of slave ownership has varied considerably between different societies. Sometimes, slaves were deprived of almost all rights in law as was the case in southern United States (Haralambos and Heald, 1995).

While in other instances, their position was more akin to servants. Slavery has frequently provoked resistance and struggle from those subjected to it. History is punctuated with slave rebellions and sometimes slaves manage to free themselves from their masters. Systems of forced Slave labour such as on plantations have tended to be unstable; high productivity can only be achieved through constant supervision and the use of brutal methods of punishment (Rodney, 1972). Slave labour systems break down partly because of the struggle they provoke and partly because of the economic or other incentive motivate people more efficiently than direct compulsion.

Caste system: The term ‘caste’ itself is a Portuguese word which means ‘casta’ meaning ‘race’ or ‘pure stock’. Caste is associated above all with the culture of the India sub-continent. The Indians themselves have no single term for describing the caste system as a whole but a variety of words referring to different aspects of it, the two main ones being the Varna and the Jati. The Varna consists of four categories, each ranked differently in terms of social honour. Below these four groupings are the untouchable – those with the lowest position of all. The Jati are locally defined groups within which each caste rank are organised. The caste system is extremely elaborate and varies in its structure from area to area, so much so that it does not really constitute ‘one system’ at all, but loosely connected diversity of beliefs and practices (Cox, 1970).

Those in the highest Varna are the Brahmins—they represent the most elevated condition of purity while the untouchable are the lowest. The Brahmins must avoid certain type of contact with the untouchable and only the untouchable are allowed physical contact with animals or substances regarded as unclean. The caste system is closely bound up with the Hindu belief system in rebirth (Haralambos and Heald, 1995). Individuals who fail to abide by the rituals and duties of their caste it is believed will be reborn in an inferior position in their next incarnation. The Indian caste system has never been completely static. Although individual are debarred from moving between castes, old groups can change frequently and frequently have changed their position within the caste hierarchy.

Estate: They were part of European feudalism, but also existed in many other traditional civilisations. The feudal estate consists of strata with differing obligations and rights towards each other, some of these differences

being established by law.

In Europe, the highest estate was composed of the aristocracy and gentry (Giddens, 1994). The clergy formed another estate having lower status but possessing various distinctive privileges. Those in what came to be called the third estate were the commoners—serfs, free peasants, merchants and artisans. A certain degree of intermarriage and individual mobility is tolerated in estate. Commoners might be knighted, merchants could sometimes purchase titles. Estates have tended to develop in the past whenever there was a traditional aristocracy based on noble birth.

Class: Class can be defined as a large scale grouping of people who share common economic resources which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth together with occupations is the chief basis of class differences. An individual's class is at least in some part achieved not simply given at birth as is common in other types of stratification system (Haralambos and Heald, 1995). In general, it would be difficult to dispute that stratification within the working class, as well as between classes as come to depend not only on occupational differences but on differences in consumption and lifestyle. Modern societies have become an important respect consumer societies geared to the acquisition of material goods. In some respect, a consumer society is a mass society where class differences are to a degree overriding-- people from different class backgrounds may all watch the same similar television program. Yet, class differences can also become intensified through variation in lifestyle and taste.

Concept of Social Stratification, Mobility and Life Chances

Social Stratification

All human society from the simplest to the most complex has some form of social inequality (Rasak, 2012). In particular power, prestige is unequally distributed between individuals and social group. In many societies there are also marked differences in the distribution of wealth. Power refers to the degree to which individuals or groups can impose their will on others with or without the consent of those others. Prestige relate to the amount of esteem or honour associated with social positions, qualities of individuals and styles of life. Wealth refers to material possession defined as valuable in a particular society.

It may include land, livestock, buildings, money and other forms of property owned by individuals or social groups. The term social inequality simply refers to the existence of socially created inequalities (Haralambos and Heald, 1995).

Social Mobility

Mobility as a terms means in the simplest interpretation measurable movement which maybe temporal, spatial or within a social framework. In strict sense, migration is mobility i.e. a specific kind of movement, but mobility does not necessarily have to be migration. The movement might result in loss of privileges or enhance it. Sorokin (1933) made a distinction between mobility or movement in the physical space and social mobility. He defined social mobility as the movement of individuals or groups from one social position to another and the circulation of cultural objects, values and traits among individual and groups.

Social mobility relates to the possibility that an individual located in a particular locus in a structured organisation can move or aspire to move from that position to a more or less advantageous position within the same structure or nearly related system. It is not necessarily a physical movement but it may involve it. The fact that there exists unequal distribution of privileges, advantages and power triggers the struggle by those below the privileged ladder, to strive, to move higher since the society places high recognition on the privileged.

Social mobility can be vertical or horizontal movement of people in a stratified society. The vertical movement—from higher to lower or from lower to higher strata—is often found in a class society. Horizontal social mobility on the other hand involves a movement within the same social class or group. It is mainly emphasised in caste or closed societies where movement between social strata is critically prohibited. However, mobility has found in class society may be intra-generational or intergenerational. The former is the movement of an individual between strata. It includes comparing positions attained across individual lifetime. The later involves comparing individual's strata or strata with their parents'. The measurement and analysis of mobility patterns depend a great deal on how social class position is measured and the yardstick employed in social distinction.

In the contemporary Nigeria, the acquisition of formal education and skills with high market value has been found to be the root of social status distinction and thus mobility. Vivid examples are found in the appointment of traditional rulers among the educated and well to do people in addition to their princely ancestries. Occupations, age-grades, standard of living, area of residence, membership of association etc. are other indices used in creating status distinction in a society (Mizruchi, 1964). Social mobility in any human society depends on the nature of the social system found in that society. Society differs in how open or closed their stratified systems are. Caste system for instance allows no mobility at all while class mobility allows limited mobility especially below the ladder of highly conscious class. Therefore, mobility studies in class societies found that there is considerable structural and circular mobility (which is upward or downward movement due to factors other than changes in occupational structure).

Life Chances

Members of the lowest stratum in stratification system which provide little or no opportunity for the improvement of status tend to have a fatalistic attitude towards life. This attitude becomes part of their subculture and is transmitted from generation to generation (Giddens, 1994). It sees circumstances as largely unchangeable; he sees luck as fate rather than individuals efforts as shaping life and therefore tends to encourage acceptance of the situation. Strata substructure tends to be particularly distinctive when there is little opportunity to move from one stratum to another. This movement is known as social mobility. Social mobility can be upward for example: moving from the working class to the middle class and can be downward i.e. from the middle class to the working class (Lipset and Bendix, 1959).

Stratification system which provides little or no opportunity for social mobility may be described as ‘closed’. Those with a relatively high rate of social mobility as ‘open’. In closed system, an individual’s position is largely ascribed. Often it is fixed at birth and there is little he can do to change his status. Caste provides an example of a closed stratification system. An individual automatically belongs to the caste of his parents and except in rare instances, spends the rest of his life in that status. By comparison, social class is the system of stratification in capitalist industrial societies and this provides an example of an open system.

Some sociologists (Giddens, 1994, Haralambos and Heald, 1995, Sauder, 1990) claim that an individual’s class position is largely achieved. It results from the personal qualities and abilities and the use he makes of them, rather than ascribed characteristics such as: status of his parents or the colour of his skin. A person’s position in a stratification system may have important effect on many areas of his life. It may enhance or reduce his life chances. Life chances is the individual’s chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable and avoiding those things defined as undesirable in his society. Haralambos, (1995) states that ‘life chances include everything from the chance to stay alive in the first year to the chance to view fine art, the chance to remain healthy and grow tall and if sick to get well quickly, the chance to complete an intermediary or higher educational grade’.

A comparison of blacks and whites in the U.S provides an illustration of the effects of one’s stratification system on life chances. Blacks and other ethnic minority groups formed the base of the stratification system. The rate of infant mortality among blacks is twice that of whites and the proportion of black mothers dying during childbirth is four times that of whites (Rasak, 2012). Compared to whites, blacks are less likely to acquire educational qualifications, their marriages are more likely to end in separation or divorce and they are more likely to have criminal records. Many sociologists see these differences in life chances as direct consequences of social stratification.

Measuring Inequality and Life Chances in Nigeria

Through in relative terms poverty is a distance along the purchasing power continuum; it is also a physical matter. One can recognise a poor person as such when one sees him i.e. his lifestyle speaks for himself. It is extremely expensive to be poor. The administrations of justice and police protection do not favour him. He is a weak bar gainer in places where government favours are dispensed, he is forced to live in a congested areas. His poor risks financially and therefore pay exorbitant rates for loans from money lenders (Mizruchi, 1964). There is a natural tendency to ask or wonder while some people wear silk or damask while others hardly cause rags to wear. This is a question of the distribution of income and wealth. Office or department rivalry, jealousy and envy often have their roots in differences in earnings. Differences in income are used to insight class hatred and it is a subject of such universal complaints has “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”.

It has been noted that the distribution of income and wealth is also affected by historical factors relating to the distribution and tenure of land as well as laws and customs governing inter-generational transfer (Sauders, 1990). The development of skills and productive potential contribute to and perpetuate inequality in the distribution of income which also translates into individual life chances.

Weberian Theoretical Perspective on Social Stratification

The work of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) represents one of the most important developments in stratification theory. Weber sees class in economic terms. He argues that classes developing market economy and by virtue of that fact receives similar economic rewards. Thus, in Weber’s terminology a person’s class situation is basically his market situation. Those who share a similar class situation often share a similar life chances (Ritzer, 1996). Their economic position will directly affect their chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable in their society. For example; access to higher education and good quality housing. Weber argued that the major class division is between those who have substantial property holdings will receive the highest economic rewards and enjoy superior life chances. However, Weber sees important differences in the market situation of the property less groups in the society. In particular, the various skills and services offered by different occupations have differing market value. For example: in the capitalist society managers, administrators and professionals receive relatively high salaries because of the demand for their services. In this analysis, Weber argued on a number of important issues. Firstly, factors other than the ownership or the non-ownership of

properties are significant in the formation of classes.

In particular, the market value of the skills of the property less varies and the resulting differences in economic return are sufficient to produce different social classes. Secondly, Weber sees some decline in the number of petty bourgeoisie (the small petty traders) due to competition from large companies; he added that they enter into skilled manual trade rather than being depressed into the ranks of unskilled manual workers. More importantly, Weber argued that the white collar 'middle class' expands rather than contracts as capitalism develops. He maintained that capitalist enterprises and the modern administration which involves large numbers of administrators and clerical staffs.

Thus, Weber sees diversification of classes and an expansion of the white collar middle class rather than a polarization. Thirdly, Weber sees no reason why those sharing a common identity, recognised shared interest. He suggests that the individual manual worker who is dissatisfied with his class situation may respond in a variety of ways. Weber was of the view that political power will not necessarily be derived from economic power. He argued that class forms only one possible basis for power and that the distribution of power is not necessarily linked to the distribution of class inequalities.

Weber was of the opinion that groups are formed because their members share a similar status situation. Class refers to the unequal distribution of economic rewards while status refers to the unequal distribution of social honour. Occupations, ethnic and religious groups and most importantly styles of life are accorded differing degrees of prestige or esteem by members of the society. A status group is made up of individuals who are awarded similar amount of social honour and therefore shares the same status situation. Unlike classes, members of status groups are almost always aware of their common status situation. They share similar lifestyle identified with and feel they belong to their status group and often place restriction on the ways in which outsiders may interact with them. Lifestyles are differentiated and accorded varying degree of prestige.

The Emergence of the Nigerian Capitalist Class

Nigeria is a low income per capital country characterised by a great degree of income wealth inequality and by widespread poverty. In this kind of context, the analysis of poverty and inequality must probe not only the factors which retard economic growth but allow those forces which constitutes the structure of inequality and which systematically generates and perpetuates poverty (Udo, 1975). The attention to the structure of inequality is more necessary in this case because from all indicators the poverty situation in Nigeria is not abating even though the country has recorded significant economic growth. Her record of economy (at least growth of GDP and even in per capital) notwithstanding over the same period, income inequalities have also grown larger and the scourge of poverty is now more severe than it had been at independence. Among the general populations of farmers, other rural dwellers, all low skilled and unskilled urban workers and of course among the ever increasing pull of the unemployed, and the outright destitute.

The development of the Nigerian indigenous capitalist class illustrates the practical economic advantages of political power while the case of agricultural sector illustrates the practical disadvantages of the lack of political power (Akeredolu-Ale, 1974).

Nigerian indigenous capitalist class has reasoned most decisively on the farmer's surplus initially and now on collectively owned oil revenue. All along, the decisive support for the emerging capitalist class has been the state machinery in the provisions of loans and other special incentives, the expulsion of foreigners and so on. Indigenous Nigerian capitalist has reasoned largely on the strength of more centralised exploitation of the peasantry and of the collective goodwill of the country. The alliance and to an over known extent overlap between the political class and the emerging capitalist class over the period has been crucial to the later evolution. Still on the evolution of the capitalist class and on the role of the political power in the making of the richer classes and the pro-haves nature of the arrangement for the acquiring of shares in a whole enterprise under the indigenisation decree is also a case in point (Udo, 1975). But as a description of the state of inequality, it can hardly be denied that it does less than justice to this complex multifaceted phenomenon. By the same token, it must be admitted that it is likely that a single synthetic index will ever be developed. What can be done is to identify dimensions along which we can define indices to measure how well families or group of families are able to command societal scarce resources. Even when one has done this, there is the problem that no absolute standard of inequality exists irrespective of socio economy of wealth. For instance, the custom of primogeniture leads to more concentration of wealth, than equal division of estates among income classes.

There is a strong tendency for people to continue to marry within income class and when this is followed by divisions of estates, wealth becomes concentrated. Human abilities are not equally distributed and the differences in abilities produce differences in income. Higher income goes to people who must have invested time and money to acquire skills. If family incomes are classified by the occupation of the family, the median income in the professional groups should be higher than those in other groups (Mabogunje, 1974). The professionals typically require more years of preparation than others.

The upper income classes tend to have certain expenses or financial obligations like; club membership,

organisation s associated with the job, which are not usually borne by lower income classes. Family background exerts some influences on the level of education which in turn affect entry into certain occupations. It is conceivable however that education can exert a restraining influence on a whole sale embrace of the "ends justify the means" tenant of the new rich in Nigeria today.

There are other subtle aspects of our natural life which contribute to inequality and life chances. The most pronounced of them is therefore tribalism and favouritism. In our everyday life, certain category of people is selected for favourable treatment on the grounds that are not relevant to the task at hand. Favouritism on any ground is operated to prevent acquisition of a higher productive capacity, or block access to jobs and thereby aggravates unemployment.

The strong national bias in favour of paper qualification blocks opportunities to accumulate skills through work experience or through further education. The compound effect of tribulation or favouritism on any grounds which block the access to job opportunities or what to be considered as deprivation in one country may well be the height of wellbeing in another. For this reason, for any dimension one chooses to consider. It is often necessary first to establish what it is to be regarded as the norm for the particular society.

Conclusion

For all citizens, concern for inequality in the distribution of income should not be seen in terms of absolute ethical principle that all men should be economically and socially equal. The state objective of our government towards a more egalitarian society does not simply forced equality or an equal state for everyone but a land of bright and full not necessary equal opportunity for all citizens. The objectives of distributive justice, however relates more to share of income. The pattern of income distribution and the scope for changing it are influenced by a combination of social and political forces which are connected with economic activities, but political consideration plays a major role in selecting a particular method of intervention.

A broadly based approach in tackling the problem of inequality and life chances cause for the following;

- a) A more egalitarian distribution of public goods and privately held asset including land.
- b) Direct public investment support to raise the income of the poor through increased, physical capital, access to infrastructure (credit) and wide range of complimentary input.
- c) Upgrading the skills of the labour force as a means of increasing both productivity and earnings.
- d) Provide the right type of education through curriculum changes which shift emphasis from academic to greater appreciation for vocational and technical training which can script the lower income groups.
- e) Re-distribution of income to the lower groups through the physical system or through direct distribution of consumer goods.
- f) The use of inheritance taxes and other measures to prevent cumulative and advantages of birth from piling up indefinitely.

Finally the indirect long term approach to the problem of raising the income level of the poor does not appeal to the poor whose problem is immediate. The poor cannot live by patriotism alone nor can he or she can forever believe the biblical statement which says "blessed are the poor" (Udo, 1975).

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