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SOCIAL CLASSES IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY ¹

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Many questions supposed to have been definitively settled have been revived and brought into new prominence under the searchlight of modern sociological theory. The discovery of the principle of the natural origin of political society and the juridical state out of gentile society and kinship organization through the struggle and amalgamation of races is having an effect upon social problems analogous to that which the discovery of the principle of natural selection has had upon biological problems. One of the time-worn social problems of this order is that of the origin and nature of social classes.

Approaching this problem from the new point of view, we find that it constitutes an integral part of the general social process inaugurated by the race struggle. There are no social classes in gentile society. They must have developed along with all the other institutions which had their origin at that stage. If so, out of which one of those early institutions have they developed? Can the sociologist trace them back to their primary source, as the anatomist traces any organ of the body back to its original layer in the embryo?

As is well known, one of the first effects of the conquest is the subdivision of the amalgamating group into a series of more or less distinct strata called castes. The conquering race becomes the high caste and the conquered race the low caste. Between them there soon develops an intermediate caste necessary to the life of the group. The high caste differentiates into a sacerdotal caste and a warrior caste. The intermediate caste is developed out of the intelligent elements of both the conquering and the con-

¹ Address of the president of the American Sociological Society at its second annual meeting in Madison, Wis., December 28, 1907.

quered races and conducts the business of the new society. The lower caste performs the labor for all, either as a great slave population or as an artisan class, often divided up into a great number of hereditary sub-castes or guilds.

Now the simple truth is that the social classes that we find today in the most advanced nations of the world are the out-growth and natural successors of those primary subdivisions of society, or castes. They are modified castes and have not been greatly transformed during the historic period. The four so-called "estates" of European history, so clearly recognized in the eighteenth century, correspond well to the four great castes of India. The Brahminic caste, or priestly order, became the First Estate, the lords spiritual, the clergy; the Kshatriyas, or warriors and ruling class, took the name of the Second Estate, the lords temporal, the nobility; the Vaisyas, or merchants, brokers, and business class, scarcely differ from the Third Estate, the commons of England, the *bourgeoisie* of France; and the Sudras, or laborers and artisans, are clearly represented by the Fourth Estate, the modern industrials, the proletariat.

But the castes of India are not the only castes, and it is now known that they exist in all countries that have undergone the race struggle, and that they are in all essential respects the same in all, being found in great completeness even in Polynesia. With the lapse of ages, especially in India where the race struggle probably first took place, these castes became firmly established and were regarded not only as the order of nature but as the divine order. It was forgotten that they arose from conquest. All traces of those remote events were lost, and the higher castes were believed to be really superior and the lower really inferior. This is clearly shown by the text of the Laws of Manu. We there read that :

The Brahmin in coming into the world is placed in the first rank upon the earth; sovereign lord of all beings, he watches over the preservation of the treasure of civil and religious laws. A Brahmin, by his very birth, is an object of veneration, even by the gods, and his decisions are an authority for the world; it is the Holy Scripture which gives him this privilege.

All that the world contains is in a manner the property of the Brahmin; by his ancestry and his eminent birth he has a right to all that exists.

A Brahmin, if he is in need, may in all safety of conscience appropriate the goods of a Sudra, his slave, and the king may not punish him; for a slave has nothing that belongs to him in his own right of which his master may not deprive him.

A Brahmin possessing the Rig Veda entire would not be soiled by any crime, even if he had killed all the inhabitants of the three worlds and accepted food from the vilest of men.

The Kshatriyas cannot prosper without the Brahmins; the Brahmins cannot support themselves without the Kshatriyas; by uniting, the sacerdotal class and the warrior class rise in this world and in the other.

Blind obedience to the orders of the Brahmins, versed in the knowledge of the holy books, masters of the house and renowned for their virtue, is the chief duty of a Sudra and procures for him happiness after his death.

To serve the Brahmins is declared the most praiseworthy action for a Sudra; everything else that he may do is without recompense for him.

A Sudra must not amass superfluous wealth, even when he has the power; for a Sudra, when he has acquired a fortune, vexes the Brahmins by his insolence.

A man of low caste who attempts to sit down by the side of a man of the highest class shall be branded on his haunches and banished.

Let the king cause boiling oil to be poured into his mouth and ears if he has the impudence to give advice to Brahmins relative to their duties.

He who has relations with a degraded man is himself degraded; not alone in sacrificing, in reading the Holy Scriptures, or in contracting an alliance with him, but even in getting into the same carriage, sitting on the same seat, or eating at the same table.

Such are the rigid laws by which the higher castes have sought to separate themselves from the lower, and they have succeeded in causing it to be believed, not only by the higher castes but also by the lower ones themselves, that there exists a fundamental difference based on inherent qualities and belonging to the nature of things. This idea still clings to the mind of man, and modern social classes are conceived to be marked off from one another by nature.

The Greeks were a conquering race who invaded Greece as well as Asia Minor ages before the Homeric period and subjugated the peoples whom they found there, reducing them to slavery. As written history began much later still, it had been wholly forgotten who the slaves were, and they were looked upon as simply inferior beings created to serve the high-caste race with which alone all Greek history and literature have to do. All

know that Plato and Aristotle spoke of the slave population in this tone, contending that both they and all "barbarians" were intended by nature for slavery, a proposition which Aristotle considered "self-evident." His most classic expression, familiar of course to all, but needed at this point, was :

There are in the human race individuals as inferior to others as the body is to the soul, or as the beast is to man; these are beings suitable for the labors of the body alone, and incapable of doing anything more perfect. These individuals are destined by nature to slavery because there is nothing better for them to do than to obey. . . . Nature creates some men for liberty and others for slavery.²

This view scarcely differs from that of the classical economists with regard to wage-earners, and it reflects somewhat accurately the popular ideas even today on the question of social classes.

The slaves of Greece and Rome, the plebeians of later Rome, the serfs and villains of feudal times, and the laboring and menial classes of all ages have belonged to a different race from that of the citizens, patricians, nobles, lords, and upper classes generally. They represent the conquered races of the world, and had occupied those social positions since long before there was any written history of the countries in which they lived. It is this fact that concealed their true origin for so long and obscured the great ethnic principle that underlies the social classes. The idea prevailed universally that they were *naturally* inferior, and that the existence of social classes was a natural condition and must always continue. But it is now beginning to be seen that the existence of lower classes was the result of early subjugation in the struggle of races which took place in the savage state of man.

Although this truth was discovered by sociologists, still the sociologists are among the last to recognize it. Certain jurists have seen that it accords with the history of jurisprudence and are bringing it forward as the groundwork of that science. Speaking of blood-revenge in primitive societies, M. Raoul de la Grasserie says :

It does not exist among castes or classes, for these do not originate at the beginning. They are formed only after the conquest. The Pariahs of India

² *Politics*, I, 5.

are conquered peoples. The *roturiers* of France were the Gauls conquered by the Franks. There must be two peoples of different race and civilization in order that the superior blood remain pure from the inferior blood. . . . Classes at the height of their intensity are castes. These latter are not found in every country, but probably have so existed, and classes may be regarded as attenuated castes. . . . The members of one caste do not, at least originally, belong to the same race as those of another. The Pariahs of Hindustan are conquered peoples; the serfs and villains of France belonged to the Celtic nation opposed to the Germanic of their lords. Of course this difference has often been effaced, but it was the fundamental distinction.³

It is, however, the ethnologists who have most clearly perceived this truth and who are best prepared to illustrate it. How closely the social classes in Greece resembled the castes of India is shown by M. Topinard when he says :

In Athenian times, a while previously to Solon, the proportion of the population was as follows: Citizens of all classes, 9 per cent.; strangers, subject to severe restrictions, 18 per cent.; slaves, 73 per cent. The warrior, magisterial, and priestly classes were the higher classes; the merchants, the artisans, and the agriculturists formed the middle class; the common laborers, the lower class or plebs.⁴

The same author, speaking of the castes of India, says that their aim

was to prevent a mingling of the conquering Aryans with the Dravidians, and consequently the absorption of the former. The first caste was composed of Aryans supposed to be pure, the second of Aryans and Dravidians crossed, the others of Dravidians. The black aborigines were excluded from the classification, and bore the name of Pariahs.⁵

Other ethnologists have made similar and even more explicit statements of the same kind. Thus Westermarck says :

Castes are frequently, if not always, the consequences of foreign conquest and subjugation, the conquerors becoming the nobility, and the subjugated the commonalty or slaves. Thus, before the Norman conquest, the English aristocracy was Saxon; after it, Norman. The descendants of the German conquerors of Gaul were, for a thousand years, the dominant race in France; and until the fifteenth century all the higher nobility were of Frankish or Burgundian origin. The Sanskrit word for caste is "varna," i. e., colour,

³ *Annales de l'institut international de sociologie*, Tome XI, Paris, 1907, pp. 153, 181, 182,

⁴ Paul Topinard, *Science and Faith, or Man as an Animal and Man as a Member of Society*; translated by Thomas J. McCormack; Chicago, 1899, p. 201.

⁵ Topinard, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

which shows how the distinction of high and low caste arose in India. That country was inhabited by dark races before the fairer Aryans took possession of it; and the bitter contempt of the Aryans for foreign tribes, their domineering spirit, and their strong antipathies of race and of religion, found vent in the pride of class and caste distinctions. Even to this day a careful observer can distinguish the descendants of conquerors and conquered. "No sojourner in India," says Dr. Stevenson, "can have paid any attention to the physiognomy of the higher and lower orders of natives without being struck with the remarkable difference that exists in the shape of the head, the build of the body, and the colour of the skin between the higher and the lower castes into which the Hindu population is divided." . . . The Incas of Peru were known as a conquering race; and the ancient Mexicans represented the culture-heroes of the Toltecs as white. Among the Ben-Amer, the nobles are mostly light-coloured, while the commoners are blackish. The Polynesian nobility have a comparatively fair complexion, and seem to be the descendants of a conquering or superior race. "The chiefs, and persons of hereditary rank and influence in the islands," says Ellis, "are almost without exception, as much superior to the peasantry or common people, in stateliness, dignified deportment, and physical strength, as they are in rank and circumstances; although they are not elected to their station on account of their personal endowments, but derive their rank and elevation from their ancestry. This is the case with most of the groups of the Pacific, but particularly so in Tahiti and the adjacent islands." Among the Shans, according to Dr. Anderson, "the majority of the higher classes seemed to be distinguished from the common people by more elongated oval faces and a decidedly Tartar type of countenance."⁶

We thus perceive that the conditions described are by no means confined to India. The race struggle has been universal, and everywhere it has produced the same effects. The first important institution to grow out of it is that of caste, and social classes even of the most modern times and in the most advanced nations are all consequences, modified forms, and true survivals of the original system of caste. Their ethnic character is never wholly lost sight of, and notwithstanding the great and universal panmixia of races, enough ethnic traits remain to preserve a rude distinction between the higher and lower social classes in every country of Europe, and even in America.

All this may seem to prove the correctness of the prevailing view that the lower classes are really inferior to the upper. If

⁶ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, 3d edition, London, 1901, pp. 368, 369.

they represent conquered races they certainly must have been inferior to their conquerors at the time of the conquest, at least in military power, otherwise they would not have been conquered. To meet this objection fully it would be necessary to enter into the whole question of the struggle of races and primitive social assimilation, which of course cannot be done at this time.⁷

In simple assimilation the contending races are really equal, neither having as yet been conquered. The success of one in subjugating the other is in that case due to some special circumstance which chanced to give it the mastery. This may have nothing to do with any inherent superiority of the one over the other. In compound assimilation, which is the only form of which there are any historical examples, the superiority of the conquering race is usually due to its having undergone a larger number of assimilations than the conquered race, whereby it has acquired a higher social efficiency. This does not prove any inherent superiority, since the greater social efficiency is due to superior equipment. There are historical examples of the conquest and subjugation of superior races by inferior ones. When war became a business certain nations prepared themselves exclusively for war. They marshaled armies and invaded foreign countries where the arts of peace were being pursued, and easily conquered them. When in the year 1260 of our era Kublai Khan, trained in the art of war so successfully practiced by his grandfather Genghis Khan, marched his conquering legions into China, subdued it, and established the present Tartar Dynasty in the Celestial Empire, it was a case of a relatively low, semi-barbaric race conquering a far higher and more civilized race. Few Englishmen, I imagine, will admit that a Saxon is essentially inferior to a Norman Frenchman, yet the last great conquest of England was the Norman conquest.

A certain kind of inferiority of the lower classes to the upper is admitted. There is physical inferiority and there is inferiority in intelligence. This last is not the same as intellectual inferiority. Their physical inferiority is due entirely to the conditions

⁷ See Gumplowicz, *Der Rassenkampf*, Innsbruck, 1883; Ratzenhofer, *Die sociologische Erkenntnis*, Leipzig, 1898; and compare *Pure Sociology*, chap. x.

of existence. As a subject race, as slaves, as overworked laborers or artisans, as an indigent and underfed class, their physical development has been arrested and their bodies stunted. These conditions long continued have told upon them through heredity and have brought about whatever physical inferiority they manifest.⁸ Their unequal intelligence has nothing to do with their capacity for intelligence. Intelligence consists in that capacity together with the supply of information for it to expend itself upon.⁹ We see therefore that both kinds of inferiority of the lower classes are extraneous and artificial, not inherent and natural.

I need not here go again over the ground already several times traveled, to show that, as a matter of fact, every time that the lower classes have been brought under conditions where they could manifest their natural and inherent equality with the upper classes they have done so in such a manner as to leave no doubt with regard to that equality.¹⁰ I shall therefore leave that aspect of the case and pass to the consideration of another quite different aspect upon which very little has ever been said.

I refer now to the admitted natural inequalities of men. This is observed on every hand by all, and so ingrained is the idea that the lower classes of society are such by reason of these natural inequalities that there has never been any attempt to analyze the subject with a view to ascertaining whether this is really true or not. Whenever the abolition of social classes is hinted at it is pronounced utopian, and the common and supposed final answer is that if we were to suppose them once really done away with, on account of the natural inequalities of men, they would almost immediately be restored, and every man would find his level. This usually closes the argument, and I have yet to see any attempt to answer it. And yet this is really such a superficial view that it falls to pieces upon the simplest inspection. It

⁸ *Pure Sociology*, pp. 286-89, 446, 447.

⁹ *Applied Sociology*, pp. 39, 91-95, 269-71.

¹⁰ *Publications of the American Economic Association*, third series, Vol. V, No. 2; *Papers and Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting*, Part II, pp. 187 [431]-190 [434], New York, May, 1904; *Applied Sociology*, pp. 97-101.

receives its death blow the moment we recognize the obvious fact that all these natural inequalities are to be found in all classes and within every class, and that no degree of intellectual deficiency is ever sufficient to cause its possessor to be removed to a lower social class. The weakest minds occur in the highest classes, and Lord Dundrearys are by no means rare. This does not make them any the less lords. We might well wish that social classes were based on some such rational grounds as this theory assumes. Unfortunately such is not the case, and not only are weak minds found in the higher classes, but, what is perhaps worse, strong minds are found in the lower, where they have no chance to work to any purpose. As Professor Huxley said of exceptional men, "no man can say where they will crop up; like their opposites, the fools and knaves, they appear sometimes in the palace and sometimes in the hovel."¹¹

But this, while it completely overthrows the prevalent view that social classes are based on natural inequalities, is far from being the last word on that subject. We have seen that social classes are wholly due to artificial conditions, and that the inequalities which they manifest are all artificial inequalities. These have the effect to produce social cleavage or social stratification. They place one man over another regardless of his worth, and generate the whole series of inconsistencies and misfits with which society is afflicted.

Now natural inequalities also have a powerful effect on society. It is not the opposite of that produced by artificial inequalities. It is entirely different. As we have seen, they have no tendency to produce social classes, but they permeate every class alike. Moreover, their effect, instead of being injurious, is highly beneficial. Natural inequalities rarely tend to make one man superior or inferior to another. They simply make men different from one another. This is highly desirable. Of course there are brilliant minds and there are feeble minds. An excess of the latter quality relegates its victim to the class of social dependents. It becomes a pathological condition. Society cares for these wards, to whatever class they may belong. With them

¹¹ *Fortnightly Review*, January 1, 1878, p. 57.

we have nothing to do. But the principal inequalities belong to normal minds. They simply represent mental differences. No two minds are exactly alike. Mind is capable of almost infinite variation. There may be a thousand varieties no one of which can be called inferior to another. Apparent inferiority is usually due to some peculiarity. Very few minds are perfectly balanced. Some faculties are developed at the expense of others. No normal and sane mind can be deficient in all its faculties. The faculty called "common-sense," the one which makes its possessor appear normal and sane, may be poorly developed, while some other mental power may be greatly in excess. There is a kind of intellectual compensation by which all are equal but in very different ways. Many great geniuses, as all know, have been deficient in the commoner qualities. There is probably no one who does not have some strong side if it could be known. Many no doubt fail during their whole lives to find expression for the chief powers that they possess. If all could have adequate opportunities there would be no member of society incapable of performing some useful service.

Now it is these very inequalities, however extreme, that cause the efficiency of the human race. The actions of men are a reflex of their mental characteristics. Where these differ so widely the acts of their possessors will correspondingly differ. Instead of all doing the same thing they will do a thousand different things. The natural and necessary effect of this is to give breadth to human activity. Every subject will be looked at from all conceivable points of view, and no aspect will be overlooked or neglected. It is due to this multiplicity of view-points, growing out of natural inequalities in the minds of men, that civilization and culture have moved forward along so many lines and swept the whole field of possible achievement.

While therefore the effect of artificial inequalities may be said to be *vertical*, in producing social stratification and creating social classes with all their baleful consequences, that of natural inequalities may be called *horizontal*, spreading out in all directions and compassing the whole earth.

It follows that the great end of all social arrangements should

be to discourage artificial inequalities and to encourage natural ones. It would be a great gain if the former could be abolished altogether, and could this be done, as we have seen, natural inequalities would have no tendency to re-establish them. We should have but one social class, or rather, we should have no social classes. All would stand on an equal footing and be enabled to put forth all their energies.

In the present state of society, even in the most advanced nations where the obliteration of class lines has already gone so far, about 80 per cent. of the population belong to what we still call the lower classes. These, although they possess natural inequalities as clearly marked as are those of the upper classes, are practically debarred from their exercise to any useful purpose. Statistical investigations, as I have shown,¹² prove that, notwithstanding their superior numbers, they furnish less than 10 per cent. of the agents of civilization, and that relatively to population they furnish less than 1 per cent. Their influence in the progress of the world is therefore practically nil, although their capacities are the same as those of the higher classes to whom, notwithstanding their small numbers, nearly all progress is due. This is entirely the result of the social stratification caused by artificial inequalities. The abolition of social classes, could it be accomplished, would therefore increase the efficiency of mankind at least one hundred fold.

It is no part of the purpose of this address to propose any method of social reform. Its aim is solely to put in a clear light the true nature of social classes, their historical and ethnic origin, and their wholly artificial character. It is hoped thereby to remove them from the list of superficial studies which start from no sound premises and lead to no safe conclusion, and to bring them fairly within the purview of scientific sociology.

¹² *Applied Sociology*, p. 208.