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*Contribution of the Classic Ideas on Social Class and its Impact on Mobility
Studies*

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Abstract

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Social inequality is no longer legitimized by natural or divine laws, and has become a central concern in different areas of knowledge. It has become study focus especially in the world of social sciences, where different theories, approaches and methodologies have been used to address the issue with a common axis: "social differentiation" as a starting point. It is understood as the conditions valued in a society for distribution and acquisition of tangible or intangible assets, leading to talk about *social stratification*. This article endeavors to make an approach to the study of social stratification from the viewpoint of the so called classical thinkers, delving into their contributions and importance in this field of research.

Keywords: Social stratification; inequality; social class; strata; social mobility.

Resumen

La desigualdad social ya no está legitimada por leyes naturales o divinas, y se ha convertido en una preocupación central en diferentes áreas del conocimiento. Se ha convertido en foco de estudio especialmente en el mundo de las ciencias sociales, donde se han utilizado diferentes teorías, enfoques y metodologías para abordar el tema con un eje común: la "diferenciación social" como punto de partida. Se entiende como las condiciones valoradas en una sociedad para la distribución y adquisición de activos tangibles o intangibles, lo que lleva a hablar de estratificación social. Este artículo pretende hacer una aproximación al estudio de la estratificación social desde el punto de vista de los llamados pensadores clásicos, profundizando en sus aportes e importancia en este campo de investigación.

Palabras clave: Estratificación social; desigualdad; clase social; estratos; movilidad social.

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Introduction

In broad terms, social stratification is defined as the institutionalized inequality existing in a system of social relationships that determines who receives what and why (Kerbo 1998). Today, societies insist on calling this system "meritocratic", under the principle of equality where the position in the social structure is based on the achievement from the individual qualification, and not from attributed characteristics such as race, sex or family socioeconomic status.

Bertaux and Thompson (2017) suggest that most people take as granted the structure they know, and circulate within it fighting for ways to survive and succeed in constantly evolving social worlds where their destinies may or may not be tied to their family origins. In this sense, the interest in social mobility is linked to the analysis of inequality intergenerational reproduction patterns and their relationship with the degree of social justice in a society where, in some cases, such analysis serves as an input for the design of public policies pursuing an equitable distribution of resources and life opportunities.

The Debate of the Classics about Social Classes

General theories of social stratification arise with authors such as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels and Joseph Schumpeter. With different proposals, these authors generate questions about the dynamics of social structure. In general terms, they conceive stratification as the result of social positions based on the functions performed and the social value of the necessary skills. These authors are framed on the same ideological postulates where social stratification is a hierarchy of merits founded on the intrinsic value of individuals and the determining psychological characteristics of their actions. Their proposals are variants of the functionalist theory that centers its analysis in the individual action considered as the unit of stratification and mobility process (Laurin-Frenette 1993).

Let us briefly consider each of their contributions: Pareto (1935) thought that there were some individuals within the social structure whose actions led them to success, and others to mediocrity; inequality between them was a function of the degree of development of qualities and aptitudes. This conception of success as a manifestation of superiority is translated into the notion of elite. The author proposes the theory of circulation of elites, where mobility in a hierarchy of personal merits is subject to individual differences in wealth, power and prestige. Consequently, each individual may be found in various positions in each branch of the social activity where he performs.

Mosca (1939) presented the theory of the ruling class, where every society was divided in two main classes: the ruling minority known as the political class, and the mass of those subjected to it. The ruling class occupies this place for its qualities to govern, whether legally or coercively. Individuals in it are strong, intelligent and superior to organize and impose their will on a large, disrupted group. They legitimize their position through a doctrine or political formula.

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In a similar direction and as a product of his political analysis of institutional or structural factors of domination, Michels (1962) formulated the bronze law of oligarchy. This is a set of principles that explain the structure and functioning of political organizations. It establishes that every political, even a democratic organization, inevitably becomes an oligarchy, meaning, it leads to the domination of an organized minority over an impotent and amorphous majority.

Schumpeter (1965) argues that economic, political and social tasks are carried out in every society. These tasks are conditioned by the times and needs of that society, creating a labor division between different groups, where the structuring of the social hierarchy depends of the functional importance of each activity. For Schumpeter, however, the upper classes have a higher adaptive capacity, to the extent that they usually maintain their position even when their function disappears or loses importance. This is explained by the existence of social mechanisms such as legal privileges, status or fortune, which allow them to consolidate a new position of functional superiority.

On the other hand, Karl Marx's idea of stratification is given by the hierarchy of antagonistic classes, defined specifically in terms of ownership of production means. Marx and Engels (1948) describe this idea from the class struggle:

(...) freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx and Engels 1948, 34)

Marx did not define class per se, but he used the term in the development of his theory of society as analytical concept and descriptive history. He establishes that class relations are based on production relations and the patterns of ownership and control characterizing such relations. Consequently, the two main social classes of capitalist society are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat: the first formed by the owners of the material means of production, and the second by those who only possess their labor power and are forced to sell it to the bourgeoisie in order to survive (Crompton 1994).

Similarly, Marx did not speak strictly of social mobility but believed that the unquestionable result of class differences was the precarious condition of life of the proletariat. In the 70's, however, authors such as Althusser (1971) and Poulantzas (1973) strengthened the Marxist proposal by conceiving society as a structure where the foundations are production relations and the upper part is the superstructure that encompasses culture, State and ideologies. The latter is responsible for reproducing the conditions of existence of the economic structure. In this way, the dynamics of stratification will be related to obtain power in the superstructure. Gramsci (1975) was a little bit ahead of

these ideas by reflecting on domination and hegemony as forms of imposition of the dominant classes, and also defining the role of ideology to reproduce the condition of classes.

Later, Wright (1992) works hard to operationalize the Marxist concept of social class, especially overcoming the dichotomous vision so that important aspects of contemporary societies such as the new job organizational processes and the achievement of educational credentials can be included in the analysis. The validity and influence of Marxist and neo-Marxist ideas in social mobility studies will be addressed in depth later in the section of social classes.

Weber, The Three-Dimensional Stratification

According to Weber (1969), there is no single way to address social stratification. The author rejects the idea of a single dimension in the explanation of the functioning of society, and presents a three-dimensional model as a result of the unequal distribution of economic, social and political power. For Weber, social stratification is the result of powerⁱ distribution among the community in a triple hierarchy. Each of the species of such hierarchy is founded on a specific type of power and therefore, is made of groups of different natureⁱⁱ: 1) economic hierarchy, based on economic power, which comprises individuals in social classes; 2) social hierarchy, based on social power, status or honor, which comprises individuals in states or status groups; and finally 3) political hierarchy, which corresponds to the distribution of political power or influence, and is composed of groups called parties (Laurin-Frenette 1993). Table 1 describes each one of them.

Table 1: Weberian Model of Three-dimensional Stratification

Weberian Model of Three-dimensional Stratification			
Type of Stratification	Category	Definition	Characteristics
Economic Stratification	Social class	“Every human group that is in an equal class situation, understood as “[...] the set of typical probabilities of: 1. provision of goods, 2. external position, 3. personal destiny, deriving, within a given economic order, from the magnitude and nature of the power to dispose (or lack of it) on goods and services and the ways of its applicability to obtain	The class situation is the direct consequence of the individual's situation in the market, to the extent that this position determines the possibility of acquiring goods, obtaining income and achieving various other goals of economic nature. Property is the constitutive category of economic power and class situation is defined

		profit or income.” (Weber 1969: 242).	mainly by the property or its absence.
Social stratification	State or status groups	The distribution of social power or prestige in a community configures its status order. "Status situation is called a claim, typically effective, of positive or negative privileges in a social consideration, founded: a) on the way of life and, consequently, b) on formal ways of education (...) c) on a hereditary or professional prestige” (Weber 1969: 245).	The status of an individual is part of his life, his expansion and his accomplishments, determined by the social evaluation of his qualities, which implies an intersubjective relationship that depends on the qualities of the evaluated person and on the subjectivity of the other members of the community, especially of their values and of what they appreciate, honor or respect.
Political Stratification	Party	"The party is a (formally) voluntary association of individuals with a view to achieving political ends, to manage the structure of domination" (Weber 1969: 228). Parties can be charismatic (faith in the leader), traditional (attachment to the social prestige of the leader), or rational (loyalty to the leader according to law).	The distribution of power is granted based on competence and effectiveness. It is the guarantee that those who possess the authority will exercise it properly, that their visions will be impersonal, functional and rational, also objective, fair and necessary.

Source: Compiled by authors based on (Weber 1969)

The conditioning relationships between the economic, social and political orders always depend on the historical situation, which means that an individual may be at a high level in one of the hierarchies, but at a low level in another. It is also worth to mention that while political and social power could be consequence of non-rational qualities of the individuals, a completely logical behavior is expected in economic power. For Weber, stratification is product of the struggle for life probabilities, based on certain types of behaviors and personal qualities that will or will not assign a privileged position.

Parsons: Stratification from the Social Action.

For Parsons (1966), social stratification must be analyzed from the function it fulfills within the social system, understanding it as a plurality of individual actors that interact with each other, with mediated relationships defined by a system of symbols culturally structured and shared. As mentioned earlier, the fundamental postulate of the functionalist theory of stratification is that the position in the hierarchy is equivalent to a reward that is proportional to the individual merit. In Parsonian theory, merit is based on the function or the contribution to the system. The author understands stratification as an evaluation where the units in a system are aligned according to the criteria of the common value system (Laurin-Frenette 1993). These stratification units evaluated and ranked correspond to individual actions:

The action is oriented towards certain objectives. In this way, the action implies selection processes regarding the determination of those objectives. From this perspective, these components of the action and the situation where it takes place are subject to evaluations, being considered as desirable or undesirable, useful or useless, satisfactory or harmful. (Parsons 1966, 258).

Thus we have that the stratification process is the result of the control exert by some members over others in a social system, rewarding those who adhere to common values and sanctioning those who refuse them. Therefore, the stratification process resembles the model of a competitive market for rewards that can be material or moral. Parsons intends to explain that stratification implies that the members of the social system have the best possible distribution, where the allocation is made according to merit.

The author's postulates are close to the justification of institutionalized inequalities, understood as a natural consequence of the distribution of benefits, power and prestige as resources legitimately acquired by individuals based on their qualities and efforts. In this regard, Laurin-Frenette (1993) mentions that the Parsonian theory is nothing but a repetition of the postulate of liberal ideology that guarantees consent to capitalist relations: those who succeed, those who dominate, those who take the best part are the most gifted, the most intelligent, the most valuable and the best. In other terms: the individual is solely responsible for his fate; economic, social and political system only exists to allow him to manifest its value.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this regard Parsons postulates:

(...) the modern social community must basically be a society of equals, and thus, as far as possible, legitimate inequality must correspond to equal opportunities for all individuals to undertake the conquest of differential rewards linked to compliance and unequal status, which must be justified by the argument of the functional contribution to the development and welfare of society. (Parsons 1970, 33)

Therefore, the mobility processes in this proposal for social stratification depend on the individual's conviction that they themselves are responsible for their social position as in the previous authors, except for the Marxist and neo-Marxist proposal,

The Rescue of the Classics from the Theories of Status and Power: Concerns in the Second Half of the 20th Century

As the authors previously reviewed, the theoretical proposals presented below specify that, although social inequality refers to social or collective factors, they are ultimately reduced to subjective determinants of the social action. However, their emphasis on stratification study varies depending on the theoretical influence of the classical authors, whether explicitly recognized or not. Thus, two different perspectives can be found in theoretical works in the second half of the 20th century: on one side is the Weberian perspective based on the notion of power as a determining factor of the social position; on the other side the Parsonian perspective, emphasizing on the status or prestige that refers to evaluation and recognition of individual merit by the community as a determinant of social position (Laurin-Frenette, 1993).

The theory based on the status points to identify the nature of forming groups of individuals according to their reputation and prestige, to analyze the differences expressed in people's lifestyles, and to define the status symbols that shape the social position of an individual before others, such as housing, clothing, speech and occupation. Those with the same status constitute a community that experiences the feeling of sharing an identity (Giddens and Sutton 2013).

For status study, researchers use different methods. A first example is the verbal assessment, constituted as a group of procedures and techniques that allow establishing the status from indicators based directly on the opinion or judgment that the members of the community make about other individuals. On the other hand there are researcher's classification techniques, where the status is objectively constructed from variables such as profession, income, housing, cultural or identity distinctions; its individual or combined use depends on the assessment intentions required by the researcher. Finally there are subjective identification techniques, based on the person's opinion regarding his social rank, meaning, self-identification as an indicator of social status, highlighting his identity and belonging status. Psychological and feeling factors play a primary role in these techniques (Barber 1964; Laurin-Frenette 1993).

Warner's extensive and popular work in the American communities did not have the stratification system explicitly as its main goal; however, it did seek to define which were the general representations or judgments people had regarding classes and how they identified with it. For Warner, there were factors of diverse nature that intervened in the definition of a person's status, besides the influence of the economic situation: family origin, ethnicity, where he lives, educational credentials or profession are some examples.

Nevertheless, the comparative analysis of fortune and professional status in relation to other dimensions of the global social participation of individuals shows that although fortune and profession are important determinants of the individual's place in the social hierarchy, they represent only two dimensions of their status within the community among many others. (Warner and Lunt 1941, 81-82)

In Warner's proposal, status is what some individuals think of others, based on who they are and what they do, that is, their ways of living and thinking, which in turn are judged and evaluated according to the common value system criteria. Consequently, social stratification as a status hierarchy is based on the multiple evaluations of the collective members on the superiority or inferiority of individuals. (Laurin-Frenette 1993; Tumín 1972).

Warner used the “valued participation” method to study local communities. He used five different and complementary techniques in his research: assessment by equivalent match, symbolic location, position reputation, comparison and assignment. He based these techniques on personal interviews with the inhabitants of the communities as data source to define the status position in the social structure (Barber 1964).

This idea of stratification depends on subjective assessments tied to people's opinions and feelings; what people believe is the reflection of their position in society.

Barber's work (1964) contains a detailed explanation about Parsonian theory of the stratification system. It is conceived as functionally integrative as it is an expression of a common table of values. It states that the consequence of interaction between differentiation and evaluation in society is a system of social stratification, a structure of regularized inequalities in which men are placed higher or lower according to the value granted to their various roles and social activities.

An essential function of the stratification system in a society is the integrative function – opposing the first impression since it accentuates differences between people - meaning, the stratification system is an expression or result of differential hierarchy judgments according to a common table of values that serves to unify society. Men have a feeling that justice has been done and virtue has been rewarded when they believe they have been fairly valued as superior and inferior by the value rules of important element in the unification of society. (Barber 1964, 17)

The author argues that in stratification study is useful to ask: What and how many are the units into which stratification systems are divided? How do these units differ? What is the differential valuation margin of a stratification system from the highest to the lowest? Once these issues have been resolved, the next step is the analysis of social position indicators used in research in vogue at the time. To do this, he explains what determines social class indicators: verbal assessment indicator, interactive indicator and symbolic indicator.

Regarding the interactive indicator, Barber establishes that the language of every society is strongly charged with value expressions:

It is clear that everyday speech often reflects the differential value judgments that form a social stratification system. If we examine what the individuals of a society say in their ordinary verbal expression, we discover that they agree, or almost coincide, in the valuation criteria and that they know a lot, though not all, about who is higher and who is lower according with those criteria (Barber 1964, 105).

But expressing what you think of yourself and others is not only done with the verbal language. The evaluation is also reflected in what they do: the interactive indicator, which refers to the reciprocal action between individuals, the way they associate and generate bonds with each other.

This indicator consists of the real association rules that people have with each other, through which they express equality, superiority and inferiority. The underlying assumption in the use of the social class position interaction indicator is that social intimacy already expresses social equality. (Barber 1964, 126)

Finally, according to Barber (1964) every social act or every social objective is a potential symbol of class position. Similarly to Veblen^{iv} (2005), Barber observes that a "lifestyle" is a set of activities and possessions closely intertwined and correlative of belonging to a social class and become a symbol of it. He describes in detail how individuals use language, behaviors, belongings, clothing, and even recreational activities as symbols of social class position. These social role symbols work as evaluation criteria.

In all societies, certain activities and positions are considered as sources, consequences or correlated expressions of functionally important roles and social class positions determined by them. Such activities and possessions are usually used by individuals in society to infer the social class position of a family or an individual. Social class position symbols include issues as different as clothing, games and sports, church where belonging, place to live and many other things an individual does or owns (Veblen 2005, 139).

However, in accordance with Goffman^v (1951) Barber observes that in many societies there is sometimes an anomalous ostentation of symbolic activities and possessions, which means that some people display symbols of social classes different from those to which belongs, whether consciously or unconsciously. At the end of his work, the author states some propositions regarding the role of class and mobility in stratification processes, but we will mention them later.

Davis and Moore (1972) understand stratification as a system of inequalities or differences in prestige or estimation between individuals in a social system. These differences correspond to the social position they must occupy and the evaluation of the functions they perform, having in turn some rewards - individual's well-being, pleasure or entertainment, and increasing of self-esteem - and institutionalized incentives.

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(...) the main functional need that explains the universal presence of stratification is precisely the need faced by every society to place and motivate individuals in the social structure. As a working mechanism, a society must somehow distribute its members in social positions and introduce them to perform the duties of these positions. This should affect the motivation in two different levels: instilling in the individuals the desire to occupy certain positions, and once in these positions, the desire to fulfill the obligations that they carry (...). The prizes and their distribution become part of the social order, and thus stratification arises. (Davis and Moore 1972, 155)

Consequently, the author argues:

Social inequality is an unconsciously developed idea by which societies ensure that the most important positions are consciously occupied by the most qualified people. Hence each society, no matter if simple or complex, must differentiate people in terms of prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality. (Davis and Moore 1972, 157)

Tumín (1972) summarizes the argument developed by Davis and Moore in a number of sequential propositions as follows:

- Certain positions in any society are functionally more important than others and require special ability to be performed.
- Only a limited number of individuals in any society have the talents that can be harnessed with the appropriate training for these positions.
- The conversion of talents into ability implies a period of training during which those who go through such training have to suffer sacrifices of some kind.
- To induce qualified people to suffer these sacrifices and to go through training, their future positions must have an attractive value in the form of a differential, that is, privileged and disproportionate access to the rare and desired reward that society has to offer.
- This differential access to the basic rewards of society results in the differentiation of prestige and estimation acquired by the various strata. Along with rights and emoluments, it can be said that they constitute institutionalized social inequality, that is, stratification.

Finally, Davis and Moore establish that every society is defined by its culture; the nature of the values and the subjective, shared goals that determine the form taken by their institutions, which represent wishes, goals and aspirations of the individuals, constituting stable means that ensure and allow individuals to be whatever they want and can be (Laurin-Frenette 1993).

Tumín (1974) begins his work stating that for all practical purposes, social stratification and social inequality are synonymous terms, although social stratification is rather used than social inequality. He understands social stratification as the arrangement of any society

or social group in a hierarchy of positions that are unequal in relation to power, property, social evaluation and / or psychic gratification

Power refers to the ability to achieve our own goals in life, even against occupations. Property can be defined as rights over goods and services. Evaluation refers to a corporate judgment, in the sense that a status or position is more prestigious and honorable than others; for some reason more popular or preferable. Psychic gratification includes all sources of pleasure and contentment that cannot be classified as property, power or evaluation (Tumín 1974, 25).

The author tries to denature inequality^{vi} saying that stratification is social; hence, implying that there are no inequalities biologically caused. The “social” aspect of stratification suggests that the distribution of rewards is subject to traditional norms or rules. Therefore, these norms likely reflect the interests of those who have sufficient power to apply the rules they deem most convenient. In addition, these norms transmitted from generation to generation lead the individuals to be unable to imagine that things may be different. The author continues:

To say that stratification is "social" also implies that the stratification system is always connected to other aspects of a society. We say that these connections are “institutional interdependencies” or “institutional interrelationships” and we understand that existing stratification provisions are affected, and in turn, exert their effects by and on other fields such as politics, kinship, marriage and family, economy, education and religion. (Tumín 1974, 29)

In a broad way, the author's contributions are summarized as follows: Stratification systems are result of the effect of differentiation, ordination or ranking, evaluation and attribution of rewards in any society. Likewise, every stratification system is characterized by having a social or cultural nature, being present in all societies, taking the form of states, classes, castes, etc. and carrying consequences on the stratified individuals, intervening in their possibilities of life and lifestyles.

From Tumin's perspective, the norms and values that underlie inequality have a psychic origin and changes in stratification systems, as well as the balance and stability of such systems are result of psychic processes determined by feelings, desires, frustrations and tensions of the members in the social systems.

So far we have seen those theoretical proposals assuming that society functions as an organism that strives to maintain balance, where stability and order are understood as natural. From the opposite perspective, a group of authors embrace the idea of conflict as inherent factor in every society, as an inevitable result of unequal distribution, which constitutes the situation of advantage of some individuals over others, where the benefits are reserved for a small privileged group. In this sense, the following authors focus their interest on the way in which stratification and social inequality disrupt societies.

Without being an explicit contribution to stratification studies, the work of Wright Mills (1957) is of great importance as it offers an analysis of the functioning of power in elites. As for Lenski, but especially for Weber who is theoretically supported, Mills thinks that power is multidimensional and recognizes three forms of it: economic, political and social power. His research focuses on the distribution of power. He identifies that American society in the second half of the twentieth century is characterized by the concentration and centralization of political power for the benefit of a restricted group of individuals, whose interests dominate all the decisions and all important policies of the country. Like Hunter (2017), Mills presents the image of a monolithic elite dominated by economic interests, that exerts a systematic and decisive influence on all government decisions, and its official politicians are nothing more than its obedient puppets. (Laurin-Frenette 1993).^{vii},

Dahrendorf's work (1962), popularly known as the conflict approach, constitutes an effort to explain stratification in opposite perspective than Parsonian stability. The author observes that social structure contains aspects of integration and aspects of power. He argues that it is worth generating an integrative proposal where stratification is a system of multiple independent hierarchies, and that the possibility of access to functions of command or subordination produces social inequality.

Dahrendorf focused his analysis on the change of societies and the way in which its dimensions contribute to the change. Therefore, he presented a macro theory about conflict and coercion, citing some ideas such as authority, antagonistic groups, imperatively coordinated associations, quasi-groups, interest groups and conflict groups, which would explain the existence of the conflict in any part of the social system (Ritzer 1993). For the author, the distribution of authority in any association explains the formation of antagonistic groups. This distribution is dichotomous, causing two groups known as the dominant -which exercises authority- and the dominated -which lacks it-. Each position has different degrees of authority; it is not held by individuals, but by the position they occupy. Thus, every order in society arises from the coercion exerted by those who occupy the highest positions, emphasizing the role played by power in maintaining order.

Lenski (1969) seeks to answer the question: who gets what and why? From his perspective, the different stratification theories thrive to resolve this doubt. In his proposal, he understands society as an aggregate of individuals with relations of "conflictive cooperation". Such relations act as mediators between the interests of maximum satisfaction of people (conflict) and the understanding of society based on rules, rights and obligations (concerted cooperation).

The instrumental means (education, money, possession) with which individuals intend to achieve their personal interests are rare. Therefore, every human society is characterized by the permanent struggle for control of these means defined as rewards. One way to win this fight is to use the various resources granted by nature and society (qualities and skills); intelligence and beauty are some examples.

He also states that, since every struggle implies power, such power can have multiple forms and comes from different sources such as property, political position, intellectual abilities, race and others; meaning, power as a personal attribute to achieve self-interest such as the subject's ability to affirm and perform through conflicting and competitive social relationships (Laurin-Frenette 1993). He also adds the concept of privilege as a function of power, which denotes possession of a portion of the productive surplus by a society. In this way, the location of individuals and their movements in the social structure will be a function of the power and privilege they hold.

For Aron (1972) the study of stratification must begin with the distinction between stratum and class, since they represent different aspects of social reality and most of the time they trigger confusion.^{viii}

According to the author, a stratum is a conglomerate of individuals occupying a similar position in terms of social status (prestige, respect, and honor), being the main concern of stratification study. It is a nominalist approach, since such groups form just a very weak and relative community of culture and life gender, and cannot become the foundation of common conscience and action (Laurin-Frenette 1993).

This idea of conglomerate and not of totality is what makes the difference between the concepts of stratum and class. From the Marxist tradition, class implies common unity, will and action. This is how the idea of stratum is real only for the observer and not for the individuals that compose it; on the contrary, the class is a subject that is real by itself, self-awareness in the Marxist sense. Aron states that consciousness is what ultimately defines an aggregate of individuals as objects (stratum) or subjects (classes). Nevertheless, the foundation of both categories is the same, that is, the similarity of ways of living, working and even thinking.

The Social Class as Axis of Social Stratification and Mobility Study

It is essential to define social class given its importance for social mobility studies. As a theoretical construct, it has been predominantly used as a reference of position in which individuals move, that is, specialized literature suggests that in order to talk about social mobility processes it is necessary to define the places of position in the social structure where individuals are initially located, and subsequently from where they ascend, descend or remain. During the twentieth century and up to the present, the “class” position constitutes the category most used by the authors in the study of social stratification. Next we will specify its relevant aspects associated with our research interests.

Following Giddens and Sutton (2013) we define class as a large-scale group of individuals who share certain economic resources (determinants of the lifestyle they have), where ownership of wealth and occupation are the most important bases of differentiation. Classes are mainly distinguished from other forms of stratification as:

- *The class systems are fluent.* They are not established by legal or religious provisions, so the boundaries between them are never fully defined.
- *To some extent, class positions are acquired.* They are not only obtained by birth. Social mobility in the class structure is much more frequent than in the other types.
- *Classes are based on economic factors.* They depend on economic differences existing between groups of individuals, on inequalities, on possession and control of material resources.

In colloquial terms, we adopt the tripartite division of social classes (high, medium, low) proposed by Aristotle (2000) in his work "Politics". It establishes that there are three elements in all State: a very rich class, another very poor and a third class that is in the middle term. The author characterizes each one of them and talks about the relational framework and the circulation determinants to which they are subjected. However, the methodology and approaches used to address the academic exercise of class analysis have involved a more complex procedure.

Wright (2015) poses the existence of three main approaches:^{ix} the first identifies the class with the attributes and material conditions of individuals' lives (Warner et al. 1949; Bertaux and Thompson 2017); the second focuses on the way social positions give control to some people over economic resources of various types while exclude others (Weber 1969; Lipset and Bendix 1963; Blau and Duncan 1967; Wright Mills 1957; Featherman and Hauser 1978; Parkin 1978, 1984; Erickson and Goldthorpe 1992); the third identifies the class, first and foremost, with the ways in which economic positions give some people control over the lives and activities of others (Marx 2005; Gramsci 1975; Althusser 1971; Poulantzas 1973; Wright 1978). Table 2 describes how the author names and characterizes the different approaches.

Table 2: Approaches of social class according to Wright (2015)

SOCIAL CLASS APPROACHES ACCORDING TO WRIGHT (2015)		
APPROACH	POSTULATE	CATEGORIES IN THE STRUCTURE
<p>Individual class attributes approach: It seeks to understand how people acquire the attributes that place them in one</p>	<p>Most people understand the concept of class by reference to individual attributes and living conditions. "Class" is a way of calling the connection between individual attributes and material conditions of life: The class identifies the economically important attributes for people, which determine their possibilities and choices in a market</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High Class = those whose wealth and high income, social connections and talents allow them to live their lives outside the "ordinary" people. - Middle Class = those who are about halfway to the economy and society and who have enough education and money to

<p>or another class, as well as analyze the process by which people acquire the cultural, motivational and educational resources that affect their occupations in the labor market.</p>	<p>economy and, therefore, their material conditions of life.</p>	<p>participate in some "train of life." - Lower Class = those who lack the necessary resources to live safely above the extreme poverty line, marginalized from the bulk of society because of their lack of education and skills needed to obtain stable employment.</p>
<p>Opportunity hoarding approach: Analyze the economic conditions of people formed through exclusion relations, and power relations that contribute to the maintenance of the structure.</p>	<p>The processes that imply a social closure, understood as the process by which a certain position is reserved for certain people, while others are excluded. Degrees are important mechanisms to monopolize opportunities, but, in other times and different places, many other institutional mechanisms have been used to restrict access to opportunities: race, marital status, gender, religion, culture, manners, accent and property have all been mechanisms of exclusion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capitalists defined by the private property rights for means of production. - Middle class, defined by the exclusion mechanisms on the acquisition of education and technical skills. - Working class, defined by its exclusion from both high education and capital.
<p>Domination and exploitation approach: Considers</p>	<p>Both domination and exploitation refer to the ways in which people control the lives of others. Domination refers to the ability to control the activities of others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Within the domination / exploitation approach, the central class division in a capitalist society occurs between those who own and control the means of

that the social struggles that challenge these forms of power are potential threats to people's privileges in advantageous class positions.	Exploitation refers to the achievement of economic benefits of the work activity of the dominated persons. Exploitation and domination are forms of structural inequality that require continuous active cooperation between exploiters and exploited, domineers and dominated.	production - the capitalists - and those who are hired to manage those means of production, the workers.
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Source: Compiled by authors based on (Wright 2015)

Different researches on social classes base their analysis on one of these approaches. According to Wright, there is no reason to consider that the approaches are exclusive, proposing a comprehensive and interactive approach to the mechanisms identified in each one. For Wright (2015), one way to combine the three approaches is to consider that each one identifies a key process that forms a different aspect of the class structure:

1. The mechanisms of exploitation and domination identify the fundamental division of classes connected with the capitalist character of the economy.
2. The means for opportunity hoarding identify the central mechanism that differentiates middle class jobs from the broader working class, creating barriers that, in one way or another, restrict people's accessibility to desirable employment. The decisive matter here is not only who is excluded, but the fact that there are exclusion mechanisms that protect the privileges of those in middle class positions.
3. The individual mechanisms and living conditions identify an essential set of processes by which individuals occupy different positions in the class structure or are excluded from those positions. This approach helps to specify what is in people's lives, explaining why few people have access to those desirable middle-class jobs and others are excluded from stable jobs in the working class.

From Wright's perspective, differences in class structures between countries are due to details about how these mechanisms act and interact. He concludes that the theoretical task is to ponder on the way they relate and combine today. For its part, the empirical task is to find ways to study^x each of its interconnections. The author calls this, his most recent idea, **Pragmatist Realism**.^{xi} It is worth mentioning at this point that Dahrendorf (1962), Giddens (1984) and even Bourdieu (1977, 1988, 1989) also suggested an integrated and dynamic analysis of the micro / macro structure of societies (the first two explicitly and the last one implicitly).

The discussion today is whether classes should keep setting a frame of reference for determining the possibilities of individuals to develop talents and abilities throughout their life trajectories; the validity of class analysis to understand the dynamics of social inequalities is challenged. For Wright (2015) the critique focuses on two of its constituent aspects: agency capacity and its empirical definition. Regarding the first, it is argued that classes in today's society do not form collective identities that guide the political actions of people. The second refers to the impossibility of developing a practical model of class structure that expresses the effects of the new capitalist production relationships such as: differentiation between ownership and management of the production means, spreading of the services sector, and the consequences of using revolutionary technologies in work organization.

These critical observations have generated a perspective currently known as postclassist (Pakulski and Waters 1996; Kingston 2000; Pakulski 2005), which outlines the superiority of conditions such as ethnicity, sex, gender and distribution of knowledge in the idea of class as explanatory factors for multiplication and complexity of inequalities, and consequently, the explanation for the position people objectively occupy in the contemporary social structure.

Although today cannot be expected that the way the stratification system works will be explained exclusively based on the concept of class as prevailed in the twentieth century studies, thinking that such concept has died as an explanatory factor is excessive. In recent decades it is observed that:

The theory and research on classes and stratification have accused greater fragmentation, not only due to political and economic transformations, but also to the changes in the perceptions of social scientists about the best way to research the social world, leading to the proliferation of approaches in regard to stratification and class analysis. (Crompton 1994, 39).

The author indicates that alternatives to overcome the use of class as an explicitly descriptive term to indicate the contours of social and material inequality from the identification of aggregates of jobs or occupations have been sought. Although in contemporary industrial societies the occupation is a powerful indicator of the existence of an interrelated network of social advantage and disadvantage, other equally valuable criteria such as gender, race and age are configured in cultural and political contexts and can complement the explanation in a more flexibly way, in response to contemporary social and economic developments.

Those work analyzing the class / lifestyles, and class / inequality / function of the State relationships can be inscribed in this line. According to Giddens and Sutton (2013), in the first perspective it is considered that in the current era the symbols and markers related to consumption play an increasingly important role in everyday life. Therefore it evaluates the class position of individuals with respect to cultural factors such as lifestyle and

consumption patterns. Bourdieu is noted, observing that identities of individuals are structured mostly around options related to lifestyles such as their way of dressing, their food choices, the care of their own body and the network of close established relationships, and how this contributes to the acquisition and maintenance of the class position (Crompton 1994).

Regarding the second perspective, the contributions of Esping-Andersen (2013) are a good way to understand how the different welfare states (liberal, corporatist and social-democratic) have an influence in the diversity or uniformity of stratification results. Similarly, the proposal of the existence of vulnerable classes subjected to preferential treatment by State policies such as the **Precariat** (Standing 2011, 2014, 2018) and the **Infraclass** are part of this recent research effort.^{xii}

Conclusions

Stratification understood as the differentiation of a certain population in overlapping hierarchical positions in a society, exists because there is social inequality in terms of rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities, power and influence. Heckman (2012) points out that we live in a society where while celebrating equal opportunities, birth is becoming destiny. If so, the impact of birth on life opportunities is undoubtedly detrimental to people born at disadvantage, and there are few options for moving in any direction in the structure to improve their quality of life. Assertions like the former are part of the concerns discussed during the twentieth century and so far the twenty-first. The classics led to the beginning of a long road for theoretical and methodological consolidation in the field of social stratification, which even today is linked to ideas such as: individual differences of wealth, power and prestige; political analysis of institutional or structural factors of domination; existence of social mechanisms as privileges and forms of imposition of one over the other.

Under this scenario, it is worth considering the effect that epistemological tradition on social stratification has had on justifying institutionalized inequalities, being the focus point in this article. This leads us to observe how research processes on strata, classes and movements in the structure are linked not only to political and economic transformations of each era, but also, as Crompton (1994) would say, to changes occurred in the perceptions of social scientists about the best way to research the social world, leading to a proliferation of approaches on the analysis of stratification and class, and the consequent theory presentation.

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ⁱ For Weber, power means the probability of imposing one's own will within a social relationship, even against all resistance and whatever the basis of SUCH probability (Weber, 1969, p.43). This idea of power is posed in an individualistic sense, since the individual is its bearer and its determining instance.

ⁱⁱ Weber does not discuss the existence of an obvious correlation between the three types of power. On the contrary, he assures that possession of economic power is susceptible: if serving as basis for the acquisition of political influence it can allow the acquisition of certain economic advantages, and the social establishment can be used as a springboard for access to political power. For instance, Weber thinks that status in modern society is generally based on the economic condition and that political influence is directly associated with economic importance. (Laurin-Frenette 1993, p.94).

ⁱⁱⁱ "And may others be convinced that misery, scorn and impotence given to them in the distribution are the fair remuneration of the small part that their modest talents allow them to take in the progress of the human species" (Laurin-Frenette , 1993).

^{iv} In his famous work *Theory of the Idle Class*, Veblen established the way consumption and other conspicuous acts serve as a symbol of social class position.

^v Goffman presents a speculative study of some of the social circumstances that restrict the amount of anomalous ostentation.

^{vi} Tumín believes that both the norms and the values base for inequality have a psychic origin, so the changes and stability in the stratification systems are a consequence of psychic processes determined by feelings, desires, frustrations and tensions of the members of such systems.

^{vii} Research such as Dahl's (2005) try to demonstrate that power, contrary to what Mills thinks, is not monopolized by single elite but is distributed among several groups of individuals with a level of influence that changes according to the nature of the policies or decisions addressed.

^{viii} In this regard, Mendieta (1946, p. 42) states that regardless of its essential nature, the class is a group, a stratum or a collective unit, words that lead to confusion because the group gives an idea of something organized, coherent and united. Because of its relationship with technical terms of geology, stratum seems to indicate a kind of solid layers well separated from each other, and finally the collective unity suggests organization, direction and purpose, as for instance in a union, more strongly than the word group. Therefore, it should be specified that the social class is determined by a combination of cultural and economic factors.

^{ix} In previous proposals, Wright (1976, 1978, 1983) supported by Ossowski (1969) stated that the concept of class could be understood in gradational or relational terms. The analysis under the gradation scheme contemplates that the division of society into social groups takes place depending on the degree to which they possess the characteristic that constitutes the division criterion. On the other hand, under the relational scheme, classes constitute a system of mutual or unilateral dependence based on causal relationships.

^x Empirical research on classes in the field of social sciences has been oriented in different directions. First, there are types of class analysis in which the starting point, and in some cases its main object of study, is the analysis of the class structure. In general the three analytic categories used are: a. Occupational class schemes created primarily as a descriptive measure of common sense in empirical research, often used in research as objectives that concern social policy; b. Subjective scales of occupational prestige or social position; and c. Theoretical occupational schemes of class built with an explicit reference to the theoretical approaches of Marx and Weber. (Crompton, 1994).

^{xi} In his text 'Understanding social classes', Wright broadly addresses these issues and generates a micro-macro model of power relations and legal norms that give people effective control over economic resources that in turn contribute to social closure structures and hoarding opportunities related to social positions. He uses the essential contribution of Marxist and Weberian stratification approaches, and contemporary elements by Grusky and Weeden (2005) as theoretical support for the model.

^{xii} Studies on *Infraclass* have been prolific in recent decades. The term *Infraclass* coined by Gunnar Myrdal (1969) to explain the social problems of the United States refers to those families and individuals who were in the lowest strata of society and to whom government social assistance expenses could not save from poverty. For Myrdal, the formation of the infraclass was the product of material deprivation and absence of social mobility channels. Later, the contributions of Harrington (1997) on the hereditary infraclass, Wilson (1980) on the infraclass as the basis of social hierarchy, Glasgow (1980) with his idea of infraclass as the relatively new population in industrial society, and Galbraith (1992) with his proposal of the functional subclass, strengthen the analysis of the social pathologies affecting a group seriously involved in the processes of social stratification.



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