



HUMAN HIERARCHIES

A GENERAL THEORY

Melvyn L. Fein

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Introduction

Aristotle said that man is a political animal. Since all political systems are to some degree ranking systems, he thereby implied that we humans are hierarchical animals, and that moreover this is an essential part of our social nature. Almost two millennia later, Thomas Hobbes in seeking to understand how human societies are possible also found his solution in a hierarchical arrangement. In the *Leviathan*, he argued that our tendencies toward interpersonal conflict could only be restrained by designating someone to exercise superior power over others. More recently, Randall Collins has distinguished between order-givers and order-takers. This, for him, is the crucial dimension in determining social class and in explaining how social power operates.

Indeed, since their inception, the social sciences have focused on differences in hierarchical rank. Hence, within sociology, generations of investigators sought to explicate social stratification. As a result, they studied distinctions in social class, social caste, and bureaucratic authority. Furthermore, these disparities in power were usually assumed to reside at the center of human societies. The question was not whether they existed, but what their consequences were. Meanwhile, political scientists concentrated on the governmental aspects of power management. Some even defined politics as an ability to create and employ social alliances so as to exercise interpersonal power. The hierarchical distinctions created by these means may not always have met with professional approval, but their reality was rarely questioned. Even anthropologists have studied social hierarchies. Often more explicitly than in other disciplines, they have described the hierarchical aspects of hunter-gatherer and small-scale agricultural communities.

Psychologists, it is true, have been less explicit in their researches regarding hierarchy, but they too have understood the importance of leadership and power. Social psychologists, in particular, have made

these the central features of their theories. Nor must we neglect the hierarchical contributions of economists. They could scarcely ignore the importance of social ranking in accumulating wealth or in exercising its prerogatives. Nor could they disregard the importance of hierarchies of authority in managing large-scale economic operations. They have realized that who got to give orders to whom—and how—was often decisive in determining what goods got produced and in what quantities.

Most researchers have also recognized that hierarchical arrangements are universal. Despite numerous attempts to prove otherwise, every known society, both large and small, has exhibited some form of stratification. In no society is power ever equally distributed. Nor are these disparities without consequence for the life-chances of the participants. Not just their personal comfort, but also their personal and communal survival may be at stake. As a result, few humans are disinterested in how the hierarchies in which they reside constructed or altered. While not all aspire to be at the apex of these power structures, few are indifferent to being consigned to their base. Accordingly, not just sociologists, but ordinary persons too are concerned about the details of social mobility. Indeed, where it is possible, most aim to move up in status. And even when this is not possible, those situated at their lower extremes are fascinated with the finer points of life above them.

Given the universality ranking systems, it is exceedingly strange that so many contemporary social scientists deny their validity. Indeed, many regard hierarchy as an anomaly. They insist that it is not a fundamental aspect of our humanity. Far from our being hierarchical animals, they regard us as innately egalitarian. Consequently, where inequalities in status exist, they attribute these to corrupting elements. Either self-seeking individuals are distorting social relationships for their own benefit or superfluous social institutions are interfering with normal human impulses. More specifically, unscrupulous elites are regularly accused of hoarding social resources so they can live more comfortably, while communal conventions such as property ownership are thought to enable some individuals to exploit others for their private ends. Either way, the resulting inequities are regarded as intolerable and ripe for elimination.

What has therefore happened is that the study of social hierarchies has been “moralized.” Instead of investigating what is occurring, the emphasis of many researchers is on establishing that this is unfair and

then on determining how it can be reformed. Although those engaged in this activity still refer to themselves as scientists, they are more properly characterized as social activists. Representative of this change in direction has been how most sociologists today describe their object of study. Where once they claimed to analyze “social stratification,” now they are more concerned with “social inequalities.” Yet the term *inequality* is not neutral. It is a pejorative. In contemporary Western societies, it connotes something illegitimate. Viewed as essentially immoral, it therefore begs to be eradicated. This being so, social disparities are regarded as inherently wrong and unwarranted.

Nonetheless, *inequality* and *hierarchy* are not interchangeable concepts. Many inequalities have little if anything to do with social ranking. Thus, the length of persons’ noses may literally make them unequal without affecting their social statuses. They may also be unequal in the color they paint their houses without this influencing who has power over whom. Hierarchies, of course, institutionalize social differences, but these are circumscribed forms of inequality. They generally center around disparities in relative power. Neglecting this distinction has led to significant confusions. The most noteworthy of these concern gender. Inequality theorists have observed the inequalities between men and women and come to the conclusion that these imply exploitation. As a consequence, they recommend the elimination of gender-based differences. Moreover, they assume that once androgyny becomes the norm, males will no longer dominate females. This perspective, unfortunately, discounts the differences between social class and gender relationships. In the rush to achieve social justice, it denies a host of important social facts.

By moralizing the study of social hierarchies, many investigators have foreclosed objective explorations into the nature of human ranking systems. Instead of attempting to discover the causal factors that create hierarchies, they assume that these are deliberately instituted by identifiable individuals and can therefore be altered by exhorting them to cease and desist. Failing this, it is imagined that social coercion can produce greater fairness. This, however, needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed. Ironically, these moralizing tendencies are evidence of the ubiquity and import of hierarchies. People, including social scientists, care about them and their implications precisely because they are concerned with their own status and that of others in their social ambit. Were hierarchy as gratuitous as is sometimes asserted, it would not be worthy of the attention lavished

on it. In other words, denial is itself confirmation of the universality and consequence of hierarchical proclivities for our species.

In the following chapters, an effort will be made to understand the basic components of human hierarchies. While there are enormous variations in the sorts of ranking systems people have generated, these nevertheless share underlying causal mechanisms. Although they may appear to be different, both micro and macro hierarchies, in fact, derive from similar sources. So do the social systems that celebrate social mobility and those that prevent it. The differences between these polar opposites is often the social conditions in which they operate and/or their developmental histories.

We will therefore begin at a fundamental, and initially, nonsocial level. In chapter 1 we discuss the nature of the causal mechanisms that underlie cumulative science. These will be contrasted with the moralistic agendas inherited from neo-Marxists. Genuine science should not emulate philosophy in pitting ideological commitments against each other. Rather, it must be empirically flexible. What we might desire the world to be has to be subordinated to what we discover it to be. Thus, if it turns out the we are by nature hierarchical and that this inevitably puts some people at a disadvantage relative to others, we may have to swallow hard and make the best of sometimes uncomfortable conditions.

This observation prepares the ground for chapter 2 where we investigate what it means to be a hierarchical species. First off this reveals that we are, in fact, not very different in how we establish hierarchical precedence than other social animals. Functional social theories are then contrasted with conflict theories to determine, in a nonteleological fashion, the multiple consequences of hierarchy. These, it turns out, may be beneficial to groups without being equally beneficial to all of their members. Factors such as the rationing of scarce resources, the internal and external protection of the group, the imperative coordination of complex endeavors and the motivation of individual effort are each explored.

Only in the third chapter will we encounter the central aspects of a general theory of human hierarchies. Here a post-Weberian perspective is employed to examine the interpersonal “tests of strength” that are at the core of establishing distributions of social power. We then investigate how victories (and defeats) in these are stabilized via the reputations they confer. We also discover that these are symbolically reinforced through expressions of dominance and submission. What

distinguishes us from most other social animals, however, is that we have numerous methods of contesting relative strength. These can be economic, as well as military, aesthetic, and technical. In any event, once established, differences in power can be so uncomfortable that they generate efforts to achieve social distance.

With the general dimensions of human hierarchies established, it becomes possible to recognize large-scale societies as composed of numerous intersecting and overlapping hierarchies. This brings us to the notorious indeterminacy of social class systems. So much is occurring within these communities that it is not always apparent which individuals are dominant and in what dimensions. Among the strengths that can be exercised are those dependent upon technical expertise, as well as those contingent on an ability to create and manipulate social alliances. Again, because the numbers involved can be very large, many tests of strength are not face-to-face, but rely on an ability to manipulate social symbols. This means that people often participate in anonymous alliances that multiply their power in determining status. Social roles, in particular, become crucial to determining who will cooperate with whom in seeking interpersonal priority.

Chapter 5 is then devoted to exploring the ways hierarchical arrangements differ. We human beings are social generalists. This means that we can meet our needs in a variety of ways. Thus, when external conditions change, we have proved able to change to meet them. This capacity has expressed itself in hierarchical institutions that range from face-to-face rankings, to chieftainships, monarchies, and democracies. While all human societies have hierarchies, these vary in the number of individuals involved, the distance between their tops and bottoms, the distribution within these limits, the social mobility allowed participants, the areas in which dominance can be applied, and the criteria utilized to determine relative strength. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish trends in how these vary. In general, modifications take place in accord with an "inverse force rule." This means that small societies tend to rely on strong social forces to maintain their integrity, whereas large societies are more dependent on weak forces. This translates into personal relationships being more important in small communities, while role relations become crucial in large ones.

The next chapter surveys the actual changes that have characterized social hierarchies. These are found to have varied in accord with three mega-revolutions, namely the symbolic, agricultural, and commercial ones.

As societies have grown in size, it has been necessary to cope with increased impersonality. This has necessitated the invention of new methods for exercising hierarchical superiority. These have included, big-man societies, patronage chains, estate systems, tyrannies, and representative democracies. Of special importance has been the evolution of social class systems. Although sociologists continue to argue about whether social class exists, it is rather how it exists that is examined here.

More specialized than social class, albeit at a lower level of social organization, are the hierarchies found in complex organizations. As Max Weber argued, contemporary societies could not function without the invention of bureaucratic techniques. Bureaucracies are characterized by organizational goals, functional divisions of labor, defined offices, hierarchies of authority, rules and procedures, and files and records. As significantly, they meld hierarchies with social roles. This enables them to limit the potential destruction of uncontrolled tests of strength while maintaining the benefits of clarified chains of command. Nevertheless, as chapter 7 documents, bureaucracies have their limitations. While providing vital mechanisms for imposing coordination and uniformity, they can be rigid and unresponsive. As a result, they have been supplemented by a proliferation of professionalized roles. The latter allow for decentralized forms of coordination and therefore more flexible means of social control.

What all this adds up to is the focal point of chapter 8. Here it is asserted that we are living in the midst of a Middle-Class Revolution. Because more people than ever are capable of performing professionalized roles both on the job and at home, they have greater control over their lives. Required to exercise self-direction in the expert positions they occupy, they are freed of the most coercive aspects of historical hierarchical formats. Nevertheless, it is difficult to achieve the expertise and self-motivation they need. This has required drastic changes in the way individuals are socialized so as to incorporate the appropriate modes of interpersonal strength. More particularly, if people are to function as their own supervisors, they must be emotionally mature and internally committed to standards of action once imposed from above. While this does not create complete equality, it does allow for unprecedented levels of personal autonomy—at least within large-scale societies.

Greater levels of personal autonomy, however, do not translate into equal levels of independence for all members of society. While the

upper middle classes have obtained the greatest benefits and the greatest increases in power, those in the lower social classes have not fared as well. Held back by a variety of cultural and structural handicaps, they have had difficulty in becoming as professionalized. Unstable relationships combined with emotional immaturity often dictated an inability to socialize their own children for self-direction. This is unfair, but results from the realities of the techno-commercial marketplace. More than this, it demonstrates that unequal power is contingent on more than the acquisition of material goods.

Chapter 10 is devoted to exploring what can be done to rectify the injustices that result from recent modifications in hierarchical status. It describes what individuals can do to improve their chances of coming out on top in the tests of strength that today determine relative power. Having experienced numerous losses, they must learn how to cope with these, but as meaningfully to overcome them. People can get stronger in comparison with others, but there is nothing automatic about this process. The salient point here is that relative power cannot be fully bestowed from above. Although people can be assisted in growing stronger, much of what needs to be done is on an individual level.

Lastly, an epilogue discusses the effects of age and gender on hierarchical placement. Age makes a difference in who respects whom. But so does gender. Irrespective of feminist arguments, men and women tend to approach ranking systems differently. Although women can (and do) rise to the summit of many hierarchies, a tendency to be more expressive and cooperative, as opposed to instrumental and competitive, alters how they are liable to get ahead.



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Hierarchy and Science

Causal Mechanisms

During the 1950s high school science teachers often reported a strange anomaly to their students. When introducing them to the earth sciences, they noted an unusual configuration of the continents. With wry amusement it was noted that if one took a scissor and cut a map along the borders of South America and Africa, the two could be fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. It was as if they had once been part of the same landmass. The more scientifically literate instructors might then refer to the esoteric speculations of Alfred Wegener. A German meteorologist, Wegener had in 1912 proposed the existence of continental drift. According to his calculations, the continents had once been joined in a single supercontinent he dubbed Pangaea. Since then, over the course of many millions of years, the original assemblage had been torn asunder, with the constituent parts subsequently wandering into their present positions. Indeed, Wegner believed that this drift could be used to explain the rise and fall of mountain ranges. He proposed that when these huge lithic agglomerations collided with one another, the astounding force of the contact thrust the impact zone upward.

Of course, all of these conjectures were regarded as idle daydreams. Every right thinking scientific investigator knew that the continents could not move. A solid consensus agreed that Africa and South America were too large and heavy to float across an expanse of basaltic rock as Wegener suggested. Even if the seafloor were plastic, the mere bulk of the continents would hold them firmly in place. Wegener produced massive volumes of data demonstrating that the rock formations on both sides of the Atlantic seemed to match, but this made little difference. It might look as if the strata on the coast of Brazil and those on the Gulf of Guinea were once contiguous, yet this was impossible. Geologists agreed that there was no way they could have been connected. Even when Wegener produced evidence of what

looked like drag marks in the middle of the Indian Ocean, they refused to accept his hypothesis that the Indian subcontinent floated up from Africa to crash into Asia. While it was appealing to contemplate the effects of an enormous collision that could have raised the Himalayas to their current height, there was no conceivable means whereby this occurred. There was obviously no causal mechanism with sufficient power to propel the scenario forward. Continental drift was at best a mental construct.

Almost a half-century later, all this was to change. British geophysicists made the striking discovery that the earth's magnetic field periodically reversed. What had been the magnetic South Pole became the north and vice versa, then after a period of time, this order was again inverted. As importantly, it was also discovered that these polarities were imprinted in the rocks that formed during specific intervals. The molecules of which they were composed aligned differently depending upon which way the poles were lined up. Soon afterward deep-sea explorations revealed candy-striped configurations of alternately magnetized rocks. Newly developed ultradeep submersibles also brought forth evidence of parallel patterns of igneous rock neatly flanking the mid-Atlantic ridge. The presence of the ridge had long been known, but it now became evident that it was a place where magma gradually seeped up to produce seamounts. The magnetic stripes flanking it were apparently caused by the magnetic polarity that existed when a particular seam of rock emerged. Their orderly sequencing was thus dramatic substantiation that the seafloor was spreading. The Atlantic Ocean was literally growing larger as cooling magma added to its dimensions. But if this were true, then the continents bordering the ocean must also have moved apart. They too had spread as the material between them expanded. This likewise implied that the distance between the continents must once have been quite small. Indeed, they may have been in contact.

Thus was born the theory of plate tectonics. Further research showed that the earth's crust was divided into a patchwork of stony plates that were in constant motion. These apparently grew along their ridges where liquid materials from the planet's mantle rose. Meanwhile, they maintained their general size as their opposite edges plunged back into the depths along the abysmal trenches that lined the deep ocean. The movement thereby created was calibrated in inches, but it was measurable, and over the course of millions of years resulted in thousands of miles of change. Here was a revolution in scientific

thought. This was a paradigmatic shift that suddenly refocused geological explanations. Continental drift did exist and explained a multitude of phenomena ranging from the geometry of mountain formations to the location of the geysers in Yellowstone Park. Wegener had been vindicated. His much-maligned theories had a basis in fact after all. The difference was that his speculations were now grounded in a verifiable causal mechanism. Scientists could finally understand how the continents moved. These masses of material did not have to float over resistant oceanic rocks. An entirely new physical arrangement had now been revealed that enabled them to alter position without violating physical laws. This new theory proposed that the continents were firmly grounded in a substrate, but that this substrate moved. What once seemed fantastic was obviously doable. The architecture of the earth was itself the agent of change.

Philosophers of science have frequently described knowledge as expanding by hypothesizing natural laws that are subsequently revised through experiment and observation. Social scientists, in recent years, have likewise emphasized the priority of statistical correlations between measurable variables as producing fresh insights into human interactions. They assert that our knowledge of social events is thus pushed forward by discovering patterns of association that mirror an underlying causal etiology. What is left out of this portrait, however, is the priority of causal mechanisms. Before science can quantify natural phenomena, it must first offer a plausible means whereby particular events occur. It must ask how things happen before it calculates how speedily they occur. With respect to continental drift, the gradual separation of immense landmasses could not be understood, nor be measured with respect to this movement, before plate tectonics explained the nature of this phenomenon. Science is not so much about correlations of variables as about how these variables are connected. Unless it can produce a reasonable account of this, it cannot begin to offer a persuasive account of what is happening—or why.

The priority of the plausible causal mechanism is evident not only in geology, but also in biology. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, speculations about biological evolution were all the rage. One of those who believed that individual species must gradually transmute from one into another was Erasmus Darwin. Like many of his contemporaries, he was impressed with the physiological similarities between ostensibly different creatures that had lately been revealed by anatomical researchers. The wings of bats, for instance, were, in terms

of their bone structure, clearly configured much like the human hand. Then there was the matter of geological evolution. Gradualists, such as Hutton, made a strong case that volcanoes and river valleys had been shaped by eons of small alterations. As streams washed down from the mountains, they gradually eroded the channels through which they passed, ultimately scouring out deep gorges. These changes might be imperceptible, but over the long haul dramatically altered the face of the planet. Added to this were the many discoveries of fossilized animals and plants. It was becoming increasingly transparent that a large proportion of these were no longer represented among the earth's living creatures. All in all, biological change seemed to be firmly established. The significant question was this: How could this happen? How could one creature give rise to a very different sort of creature when it was obvious that animals and plants reproduced offspring like themselves?

One of the most influential of the then current theories of evolution was that of Jean Baptiste Lamarck. A professor of zoology at the French Museum of Natural History, he suggested that animals mutated by passing along acquired characteristics. Individual changes made in the parents' morphology would be inherited by their offspring. Thus an antelope that stretched its neck to reach the leaves on higher tree branches would produce offspring with longer necks. If this process continued long enough, the result would be a giraffe. The problem with this hypothesis was that it contradicted accessible observations. Men who pumped iron to increase their muscle mass did not necessarily sire well-endowed sons. Moreover, didn't the Bible inform us that God created the species that populated the firmament? Wasn't a theory of evolution therefore an act of impiety? Many educated persons agreed with this assessment and soon found a champion in Georges Cuvier. A celebrated anatomist, Cuvier propounded a theory of catastrophism. More aware than most of the progression of creatures in the geological record, he argued that this was caused by a series of geological calamities. Events, such as Noah's flood, periodically wiped out vast swaths of flora and fauna, thereby clearing the stage for new creations. God was very much in charge of Cuvier's universe. Any appearance of evolution was merely that, an appearance.

A broadly accepted theory of evolution could not occur until this obstacle was overcome. Unless science could produce a plausible mechanism of biological change, few would acknowledge its reality. Not until after mid-century did this occur. It was only then, after two

decades of gestation, that Charles Darwin found the courage to announce a controversial hypothesis. The grandson of Erasmus, he would suggest a causal mechanism that took the intellectual community by storm. Stimulated by his observations on the five-year circum-navigational voyage of the HMS Beagle, and further inspired by the demographic ponderings of Thomas Malthus, he, in 1859, produced his masterwork, *The Origin of Species*. In this bestseller, he argued that species mutated into new forms through a process of *natural selection*. Creatures in competition for continued existence produced offspring with a differential propensity for survival. Since there was a natural variation within populations, those individuals best suited to prevail did so. In time, the persistence of the fittest would shift their morphology in one direction rather than another. As on the Galapagos Islands, finches with the beaks best suited to exploit the available foods would become dominant. Unlike their ancestors, some would be characterized by stout beaks for crushing hard seeds, while others developed narrower beaks for eating insects. They would thus appear to be distinctly new creations.

Darwin's theory had the advantage of relying on a mechanism that could be seen in daily operation. The British gentry had long been breeding horses to produce the fleetest steeds. They bought and mated stallions and mares with desirable characteristics in the hopes of producing foals with more desirable characteristics. They also engaged in artificial selection to create new breeds of dogs and pigeons. Clearly, what Darwin said did happen could happen. New sorts of animals could be bred from existing populations. His defense of evolution was persuasive precisely because he provided a plausible method for change. Darwin did not cite a mere correlation of variables. In a sense, this association had long been available in the form of comparative anatomy. What he added was a causal bridge. It was his ability to visualize how a competition for survival could make a difference. It was this that placed evolution in context and provided other scientists with the insights into what must be investigated to validate his hypotheses.

If any additional confirmation of the centrality of causal mechanisms to science is necessary, it is provided by physics. Isaac Newton, even in his own day, was heralded as a genius. His theories of gravity then were cited as the epitome of scientific progress. Their mathematical precision, in formulating laws of nature, was regarded as the embodiment of naturalistic rigor. So exact were these formulae that they are

still employed to calculate the trajectories of earth orbiting satellites. Yet Newton's numbers would not have made sense without a fundamental alteration in the way physical relationships were conceived. Building upon the contributions of Copernicus and Galileo, Newton sought to explain the motions of heavenly bodies. But he went further. He sought to connect what happened on earth with what occurred in the skies. In order to achieve this, however, he had to reformulate the variables involved. Where his predecessors had thought in terms of celestial spheres and the natural positions of physical objects, he introduced the notions of *force* and *mass*. Although this may today seem obvious, in his day it was an intellectual breakthrough. It literally remade the building blocks of the universe.

What has nowadays been forgotten is the kind of causal mechanisms medieval scholars took for granted. As they gazed up into the heavens, they could not imagine how the stars could remain suspended if they were not held in place by something solid. Since they could not see this something, they hypothesized crystalline globes to which the stars and planets were attached. These were thought both appropriately tangible and suitably invisible. Back down on the ground, academics were confronted with another conundrum that required an explanation. Why, they asked, did some objects fall, whereas others rose. Following Aristotle, they concluded that corporeal entities were merely seeking their natural place in the scheme of things. The essence of some was to be heavy and therefore lower down, whereas others were light and inclined to move higher. It all seemed so simple. Reality was imbued with a God-given order that physical objects innately sought to replicate.

Newton's universal law of gravity, which states that the force between any two bodies is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the distance between them, would have been nonsensical in an Aristotelian universe. In Aristotle's world, objects moved in straight lines and at a constant speed according to their weight. Planetary orbits deflected into ellipses because they responded to gravitational pulls were thus beyond the ken of Greek or medieval thinking. Aristotle did not calculate in terms of forces and masses. As a consequence, he could not have imagined Newton's laws of motion. Even something as apparently simple as inertia did not fit into his scheme. The upshot was that his cosmos was not the clockwork universe of his successor. Yet the difference between the two was the causal mechanisms they postulated. A dramatic alteration

in the perception of how events are connected utterly changed what constituted a valid explanation of reality. Identifying physical objects as possessing constant quantities of mass, set in motion by measurable impulses of energy, enabled scientists to produce mathematical equations connecting these phenomena. Aristotelian essences were not similarly measurable. Nor did they lend themselves to an explanation of how stellar objects stayed aloft without the aid of tangible supports. Without the notion of a force of gravity, no other sort of account seemed sensible.

The Moralistic Imperative

Having read this far, the reader is perhaps confused as to what this book is all about. As its title conveys, this book is not about geology, evolution, or geophysics. Rather it is an effort to understand the nature of human hierarchies. The point in beginning with an exegesis of the role of causal mechanisms in establishing science is to contrast this with the less empirical strategies sociology has employed in explaining human ranking systems. Indeed, the first question that any science must answer is this: What is it trying to understand? What phenomena is it seeking to elucidate? Remarkably, sociology has misconceived the way it has approached what it once called social stratification. The discipline's current condition is more akin to Aristotelian naturalism than Newtonian physics, Darwinian evolution, or plate tectonics. Instead of seeking an observationally grounded causal mechanism to clarify disparities in social status, it has taken refuge in conceptions more reminiscent of Aristotelian essences. What it has sought to explicate is why particular people are more powerful than others, not why and how people participate in ranking systems. Instead of exploring the reasons human beings are hierarchical creatures, it has concentrated on evaluating the validity of specific hierarchies. Unfortunately, this has a moralistic quality comparable to the ancient belief that objects sought their "natural" places in the universe. It, in essence, asserts that some ranking systems are more valid than others. In this, sociology has not yet found building blocks analogous to Newtonian mass and force, Darwinian natural selection, or plate tectonics. This has left it ill prepared to engage in a scientific investigation that results in a cumulative expansion of data-based knowledge. Indeed, in its current stage of development, at least with respect to the nature of human hierarchies, it is trapped in a morality play suffused with exhortation and self-righteousness.

Where things presently stand is on blatant display in the flagship journal of reviews published by the American Sociological Association (ASA). Where once the opening subhead of *Contemporary Sociology's* section on recent publications was labeled *social hierarchies*, it has since been relabeled *inequalities*. No doubt, many advocates of this transformation characterize it as a candid reflection of the association's growing commitment to social justice. They portray such efforts as an honest attempt to deal with the issues confronting society. Rather than run away and hide from social exploitation, the organization has decided to stop sheltering behind a pusillanimous show of neutrality. Although he remains a sociological icon, Max Weber's notion that science should pursue *value neutrality* is widely scoffed at. In fact, many social scientists argue that neutrality is not possible. Everyone, including scientists, is alleged to have a point of view that distorts how the world is apprehended. So why not admit this? And why not go further and embrace the implications of human bias? Would it then be possible to convert this from a negative to a positive? If the world is unequal—and it is—why not align oneself with the victims of inequality?

It is not too much to assert that a majority of contemporary sociologists are unabashed advocates of social justice. They believe that pursuing this end, rather than knowledge per se, is the ultimate purpose of a self-respecting science. What good, they ask, is knowledge if it stands on the sidelines while millions of innocents suffer? What is the point of never seeking to make the world a better place? This, indeed, is the conventional rationale for replacing a concentration on social hierarchies with one on inequalities. In focusing on the latter, they wish to understand why some people are submerged so they can assist in alleviating their plight. Their goal is to understand how inequality is imposed so as to expunge it from society. As most would readily admit, they are dedicated to "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." Merely studying social hierarchies as an intellectual exercise would be tantamount to accepting social injustice. It would be equivalent to admitting that this cannot be reversed.

To put the matter bluntly, many sociologists have become moralists rather than social scientists. They perceive themselves as change agents rather than detached investigators. More than this, they have become moralists with an identifiable agenda, which is to say, they have particular commitments they wish to promote. Most sociologists are adamant egalitarians. They crave a world in which everyone

is on a par. From their perspective, inequality is immoral. It is an evil to be resisted and eliminated. As a result, their chief concern is not in understanding how inequalities are created, but in documenting their presence in specific instances. They wish to expose the evil so it can be attacked and destroyed. In this, they are also oriented toward understanding how social movements can be harnessed to deal with particular injustices. The idea is to discover the most effective means of instituting moral solutions. If this is so, then referring to their enterprise as science is erroneous. It is little more than an attempt to co-opt an honorific title.

So successful have the exertions of these moralists been that numerous publishing houses have joined the ASA in describing their wares as pertaining to inequality rather than social hierarchy or social stratification. This, to be sure, amounts to little more than advertising their products in the terms congenial to their customers. But something more serious, and more sinister, has resulted from the crusade to institutionalize the study of inequality. In recent years, college courses on “race, class, and gender” have proliferated. Authors, professors, department heads, and university administrators have assumed that these subjects deserve to be taught together. They argue that what they have in common is that all of them deal with inequality. Each, it is contended, is about categories of individuals who have been subjected to social oppression. Moreover, if this can be established, then the weight of public opinion can be mobilized to root out racism, classism, and sexism in all of their nefarious incarnations. After it is understood that inequality is a ubiquitous manifestation of social injustice, the level of public outrage may grow to sufficient proportions to effect a revolution in social conditions.

The reason this agenda is so sinister is that it quietly, and deceitfully, implies the presence of nonexistent equivalences. The very act of grouping these subjects together suggests that they are caused by comparable factors. Instead of investigating their natures and etiology separately, it is assumed that these are the same. As will shortly be apparent, the underlying postulates of this approach are neo-Marxist. Not only is it alleged that the central issue of race relations, social class, and gender associations is inequality, but that the cause of these disparities is exploitation. Without a shred of evidence, a version of class warfare is put forward as the crucial force animating male/female and race relations. Little effort, however, is made to ascertain these facts. If Karl Popper’s thesis that science is distinguished by assertions

that are, in principle, open to disconfirmation, then this is not science. Worse still, in pretending to be, it discourages the real thing. Thus, it persuades students to eschew investigating whether the dynamics between employers and employees are comparable to those between husbands and wives. Ordinary people may chuckle at the thought that industrial and domestic affairs are based on identical interactions, but those in the throes of neo-Marxism do not.

The inequality thesis is, at minimum, tendentious. It exploits the connotations of a widely respected concept to turn peoples' beliefs against them. In the United States, inequality is generally considered a bad thing. Most Americans are committed to defending democracy and often suppose this implies complete equality. Tutored in the words of the Declaration of Independence, they take Thomas Jefferson to mean that all men (and women) are equal in every dimension. Nevertheless, most do not connect this with his assertion that this is an equality of rights. Jefferson never believed everyone equal, only that they had an unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What has happened in the sociological invocation of inequality is that a neo-Marxist interpretation has been smuggled into play. Where the democratic notion of equality referred to a moral equivalence, that is, to an equivalence in social opportunities, the neo-Marxist concept asserts a need for an equivalence of results. Unless everyone is equally wealthy, equally powerful, and equally successful, injustice is said to prevail. Ordinary Americans are thereby bamboozled into supporting the notion that there should be no differences between men and women or between the rich and poor. Rather than allow people to scrutinize the differences within these social categories, the possibility that they might be legitimate is ruled out of bounds. As troublesome, the mechanisms creating these differences are treated as unworthy of study. That which is immoral must be abjured rather than inspected.

This method of interdicting science is not new. It has previously been utilized to discourage the empirical study of physics and biology. In the Aristotelian universe, the celestial orbs were not only crystalline spheres—they were perfect ones. Circles were assumed to be geometrically flawless. As a result, only they could be used to construct the vault of heaven. Earthly domains might be corrupted by human defects, but that of the Gods could not. It had to be unassailable. So obvious did this seem that when Copernicus proposed a heliocentric system, he too supposed the planets moved in circular orbits. It took an act of courage for Kepler to contradict this and suggest that their

paths were elliptical. It took even more courage for Galileo to peer at the sun through his telescope and report the spots he witnessed. As he was soon to learn, the conventional wisdom would not tolerate assertions of an imperfect sun. Despite appeals to his detractors that they look for themselves, he was ultimately placed under house arrest for the temerity of impugning the Bible.

Darwin too was victimized by a moralistic conventional wisdom. The primary objection to his theory of evolution was that it suggested human beings were descended from apes. How, it was asked, could a creature created in the image of God be related to a lowly animal? This was an insult to human intelligence. It was an offense against the sacred soul the deity had implanted into people, but not beasts. To this day, evolution remains controversial. Repeated efforts have been made to force biology teachers to include *intelligent design* in their curricula. This is said to be an alternate hypothesis, but everyone knows the import is to return religion into the schoolhouse. Antievolutionists continue to bewail the Godless character of Darwinism. They do not examine the evidence in favor of the transformation of species so much as disparage its inadequacy. Yet, for them, any evidence would be inadequate. They already know what they believe; hence they oppose a disinterested survey of the facts.

The same may be said of contemporary approaches to the study of human hierarchies. The neo-Marxists already know what they believe. They, and those they have been able to influence, understand that hierarchy is inherently unjust. They do not need to look at facts to conclude that it is unacceptable for some people to be more powerful than others. Nor do they need to investigate the evidence of history to decide that complete equality is feasible. Because it is sacrosanct it has to be.

The Neo-Marxist Hegemony

In the United States, an overt assertion of Marxism is anathema. Despite years of media aspersions against McCarthyism and the Red Scare, communism remains in bad odor. Anticommunism may be regarded as heavy-handed, but communism still smacks of totalitarianism. Even so, some of the central tenets of Marxism have become familiar fixtures in the political landscape. They are utterly familiar in academic settings, where liberalism has become the received wisdom. This is the milieu in which the social sciences, and in particular sociology, operate. Surveys show that the vast majority of practitioners

(upwards of ninety percent) identify with left-wing causes. It is not surprising, therefore, that Marxist concepts, such as *exploitation*, have become standard academic tools. They are where countless investigators begin their studies. They are also where a majority end up.

Within sociology it is largely taken for granted that hierarchy is grounded in exploitation. Mainstream sociologists such as Douglas Massey are frequently explicit about this. As he explains, “inequality is generated and perpetuated by two basic mechanisms: exploitation and opportunity hoarding. *Exploitation* occurs when people in one social group expropriate a resource produced by another social group and prevent them from realizing the full value of their effort in producing it. *Opportunity hoarding* occurs when one social group restricts access to a scarce resource, either through outright denial or by exercising monopoly control that requires out-group members to pay rent in return for access. Either way, opportunity hoarding is enabled through a *socially defined process of exclusion*.” In other words, one group—read the elite—cheats the other—read the weak—out of their rightful due. The one is immorally selfish, whereas the other is illegitimately victimized.

Exploitation, of course, is what Marxists claim that capitalists impose on proletarians. As owners of the means of production, business owners reserve the greater part of the profits for themselves. They simply skim the *surplus value* created by the labor of their workers, while providing little more than subsistence to the actual authors of their wealth. Instead of dividing the riches equally, they act as if they were worth more than their employees. Unashamed of the mansions in which they reside, or the chauffeured limousines in which they travel, they care not a whit that they unfairly appropriate that which does not belong to them. As should be clear, this is a patently moralistic assessment. It asserts that capitalists are bad people because they steal what should rightfully go to others. Exploitation is not a neutral concept. It does not describe what happens so much as what should happen. There is no such thing as “good” exploitation. It is always about taking what should not be taken.

The basis of this taking is, of course, unequal power. Capitalists control the means of production because they can. Similarly, they impose an unequal distribution of the fruits of production because they have the strength to dictate this arrangement. Were it not for unequal power, exploitation would be resisted. The implication of this is that if exploitation is wrong, the unequal power that makes it

possible is also wrong. Power too is, therefore, deemed immoral. In a just world, everyone would exert as much control as everyone else. All would be able to do whatever they wanted without fear of interference from others.

In the neo-Marxist cosmos, total equality is the default position. It is presumed to be the natural human condition. Radical egalitarians assume that everyone wants to control his or her own destiny and therefore any interference is unwanted. The unequal power that imposes exploitation must, as a consequence, come from outside sources. Left to their own devices, every individual would tend to his/her own business and refrain from meddling with others. If so, this balance can only be upset by oppressors who seek more than their fair share. In other words, inequality must be invented and imposed. Because in a state of nature harmony will prevail, malevolent individuals have to import their nefarious schemes into the system. This was what Jean Jacques Rousseau preached. He believed that people were born innocent, but subsequently corrupted by civilization. Moreover, he thought that the primary agent of vice was property. If some people owned more than others, they could use this surplus to manipulate events in their own favor. Indeed, the mere existence of property tempted people to compete for a larger proportion of the spoils. Instead of contenting themselves with what they needed, they would seek to outdo their peers and in the process resort to unscrupulous means. If necessary, they would cheat, intimidate, and outspend others into misery.

Rousseau went further. He asserted that property itself was an invention. Somewhat disingenuously, he proposed that once upon a time a social innovator fenced off a parcel of land and claimed it for himself. When others made the fatal mistake of respecting this appropriation, the scene was set for dividing the surface of the earth into a patchwork of unnatural domains. Each owner was then free to deprive the rest of a patrimony that rightfully belonged to all. This meant that proprietors received more than nonproprietors, with the offensive outcome that they could lord it over the less fortunate. Property was thus no more than an institutionalization of selfishness. It resulted from the greed of some, while it imposed an unwarranted burden on others. Without the artificial existence of property, inequality could not be enforced. Without property, power would be equally distributed.

Nowadays neo-Marxists have extended the argument against property to any form of interpersonal competition. The mere idea of someone trying to defeat anyone else in order to obtain priority

is condemned. Competition is characterized as a capitalist invention that of necessity assaults the *self-esteem* of the weak. Games, for instance, are condemned as mechanisms for shattering self-worth. It is maintained that if they are played, they should be played exclusively for pleasure. Keeping score is thus scorned as barbaric. People would do better to return to the mutually supportive activities that characterized precapitalistic days. Before they sought to acquire greater wealth than their fellows, a more caring and egalitarian spirit prevailed in hunter-gatherer societies. Back then, people helped one another because they wanted to. No one sought to be a winner relative to others; hence cooperation was the normal mode of operation.

The conception of inequality as being invented, and imposed, by selfish individuals has been appropriated by feminists. Women are alleged to have been thrust into virtual slavery by egocentric men. At least since the invention of agriculture, males are said to have utilized their greater upper body strength to force women into subservience. When women demand an equal share of the power, they are threatened with rape. Unless they stay home, barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen, their husbands intimidate them into passivity. This so-called male hegemony is regarded as being artificial as the dominance exercised by property owners. Were the power of this masculine dominion overturned, gender relations would return to their natural state, namely androgyny. The sexes would then treat each other as equals, with the result that all would be more content.

If equality is, in fact, the natural human state, and inequality merely a corruption of this condition, a return to equality can presumably be initiated by eliminating the manufactured causes of unfairness. This indeed is the strategy of many neo-Marxists. Since they believe that the agents of corruption are identifiable individuals, they believe that once they are eliminated rectitude will return. Equality will not have to be instituted by any particular means because it will emerge spontaneously. This conviction usually translates into a determination to rid society of its elites. Those at the top of the heap are the obvious candidates for corruptors-in-chief. As the beneficiaries of inequality, they supposedly engineered its emergence. They are evidently the ones who invented property, competition, and the male hegemony. They are also the ones who must continue to impose these evils. While it is true that, according to Massey, the depredations of the privileged are reinforced from below, this is only because those lower down the social pyramid *emulate* their superiors. With no one left to copy, they

would presumably revert to their more egalitarian impulses. Thus, once opportunity hoarding has disappeared, no one will be motivated to sustain inequality.

Since at least the Jacqueries of the Middle Ages, egalitarians have promoted revolutionary movements. They have actively sought the overthrow of their presumed enemies so that justice could emerge. Once the elitists were removed, the problem would doubtless be solved because there would no longer be anyone left with the power to perpetuate partiality. Oddly, revolutionaries never seem to contemplate the possibility that those who lead insurrections might thereby acquire the power to take the place of those recently deposed. One example of this phenomenon was the French Revolution. The Paris mobs demanding *liberte*, *egalite*, and *fraternite* were within short order persuaded that their deliverance could be achieved by guillotining most of the aristocrats, beginning with the king. With the old estates broken up and the traditional despots beheaded, ordinary people would have the yoke removed from their necks. Only this is not what happened. Within a remarkably abbreviated period, a man on horseback appeared. Napoleon Bonaparte posing as an agent of liberation quickly became their emperor. Worse still, when he ordered the common people into his Grand Army, they became cannon fodder even more surely than under the ancient regime.

The Russian Revolution was even more heartbreaking. It too promised the deliverance of a disinherited underclass, but wound up subjugating those it championed. The vast Russian Empire, until recently divided between serf and boyar, was to be in the vanguard of socialism and communism. The Bolsheviks, having just witnessed the old aristocracy overthrown, would, upon assumption of command prevent counterrevolutionaries from returning to an outmoded version of capitalism. Whoever supported a hierarchical structure, such as those joining the White armies, would be treated as roughly as necessary to bar them from power. Just how rough this would be soon became evident. In time, many millions were killed, some in the gulag, some by enforced starvation, some after show trials, and some bludgeoned to death by the secret police. Were a full accounting possible, it would be clear that most of these were ordinary folks. Stalin, and his agents, may have characterized them as enemies of the people, but the overwhelming majority were apolitical. They merely had the misfortune to fall prey to the paranoid suspicions of a greater tyrant than the Tsar. Furthermore, as events eventually made clear,

this wholesale slaughter did not excise the notion of hierarchy. First of all, the communist party apparatchiks usurped the prerogatives of the former rulers. They confiscated the fancier dachas for themselves and shopped at hard currency stores for goods unavailable to lesser persons. Secondly, a simmering desire for the products of Western marketplace economies ultimately led to a second revolution that deposed the communists themselves. A system that was supposed to be the envy of the world degenerated into a parody of itself, riven by hypocrisy and exhausted by decades of effort to enforce an equality that would not remain settled.

None of these disappointments, however, have discouraged modern neo-Marxists. They are still determined to enforce equality by eliminating all elites. Less bloodthirsty than their more doctrinaire predecessors, their goal is still to exclude those with whom they disagree from power. Fortunately, today's radical leftists place more emphasis on censorship and organizational domination than on the whip or bullet. They typically pursue political control in preference to physical supremacy. Of course, they deny this and claim to act only in the service of democracy. Yet despite their lip service in favor of rights such as free speech, when in control of the news media or academic institutions, they keep a firm grip on the messages these institutions promote. They make certain that editorial tools are utilized to tell some stories, but not others. A sort of selective perception is forced on the public by presenting the neo-Marxists and their allies as heroes and their opponents as malefactors. In general, political correctness and class warfare have become the order of the day. This means that that which is thought to endorse a nonprogressive agenda receives short shrift, whereas inspirational models of liberal compassion are celebrated.

Added to this are careerist incentives to conform to the egalitarian position. Conservatives learn to their dismay that they need not apply for jobs at some television networks, and that many universities will not hire PhDs with the incorrect outlook. If, however, right-wingers are mistakenly appointed, they are not promoted or awarded tenure. The excuse is that they are not talented enough to be retained; yet the real reason is that they support the wrong political positions. Deviation is not tolerated because neo-Marxists believe that if a consistent point of view is propagated, the masses will eventually support egalitarianism. Like the Leninists before them, they have faith in the power of propaganda and institutional rewards to create an updated version of

what the soviets called the “new communist man.” They too accept as true the proposition that hierarchy is underwritten by the ascendancy of immoral people, hence that if their depravity can be eliminated, justice must triumph. The difference is that, unlike their forerunners, they would rather reeducate than convert by the sword. Either way, they assume that once the obstacles to egalitarianism are neutralized, a brave new world of classlessness will emerge.

The neo-Marxists are, in a word, utopians. Marx may have loathed being lumped together with the romantic socialists of his era, but his successors have nonetheless elevated idealistic aspirations as their preferred endpoint. Like Marx, they want society to provide every individual with what he or she needs, while they voluntarily expect everyone to supply what they can according to their abilities. This is thought to be the logical state in a society where no one dominates and from which the temptations of property ownership have been removed. So great is their confidence in the naturalness of egalitarian impulses, that they envision universal generosity as the standard. Much like Rousseau, they believe personal kindness is innate to humankind. They take for granted that people are not biologically disposed to compete with one another and that when free to be themselves are considerate of each other’s needs. No longer forced to outdo one another, they will respond favorably to calls for cooperation. Although the neo-Marxists would no doubt be scandalized by the comparison, theirs is an updated version of early Christianity. The difference is that their millennium is not triggered by a universal conversion to a theistic faith. It will supposedly arrive once a unanimous commitment to equality develops.

But is this possible? Attractive though the neo-Marxist vision may be, is the future likely to unfold as predicted? Will everybody be converted to the true belief? And once they are will they behave as expected? As importantly, will they stay converted? Christians, of course, had difficulty meeting the first requirement. They were lucky to have their faith adopted by the Roman Empire, but they could not prevent schisms from appearing among the faithful. There were, for instance, serious divisions regarding the divinity of Jesus. Among the neo-Marxists a tendency to fragment is as evident. A myriad of competing denominations have emerged to contend for the mantle of the true faith. Leninists, Trotskyites, Maoists, conflict theorists, and critical theorists all claim to possess the correct interpretation of the Marxist legacy. Eying one another with suspicion rather than with

altruistic cooperation, they exchange accusations of heresy and worse. Nor have the neo-Marxists proved more successful than Christians in translating ideological purity into behavioral integrity. Even Christians admit that many of their own descend into vice. Appearing in church on Sunday evidently does not inoculate against every temptation of the flesh. Despite professions that they have come to Christ, many still lie, cheat, or steal. Among committed Marxists perversities in conduct have been as legion. Following Stalin, many have participated in grand scale butchery and corruption. Even in Western societies, neo-Marxists have been far from choirboys. Many of them have engaged in treasonous spying, duplicitous deal-making, and rancorous argumentation. Regardless of their commitment to egalitarian ideals, they have not proved immune to pettiness or hypocrisy.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the last prerequisite for the long-term triumph of utopian Marxism is the most troublesome of all. Keeping everyone committed to egalitarian principles has yet to be substantiated as possible. Since Marx's day, there have been a number of revolutions dedicated to implementing his philosophy. Although none of these has been completely successful—e.g., the Russian and Chinese versions—contemporary neo-Marxists are undeterred. They insist that arrogant leadership corrupted these upheavals, but once less selfish organizers take charge, depravity and degeneration will be avoided. The question nevertheless remains as to whether this is true. Is inadequate management the cause of failure? Here let us shift our analogy from Christians to pacifists. Pacifists maintain that once everyone is dedicated to peace, war will become impossible. They claim that if everyone will refrain from attacking others, violence will be consigned to the dustbin of history. While they understand that pacifism has never been universal, they believe that exhortation can convince the majority of humankind of the advantages of worldwide harmony. What they leave out of their calculations, however, is that if everyone becomes a pacifist, some enterprising souls are bound to realize that they are surrounded by a sea of sheep. It will occur to these potential free riders that the passivity of their neighbors is an invitation to dominate them. No doubt they will ask themselves, if these others will not resist, why not take advantage of their acquiescence? At this, at least some will unquestionably resort to violence to extract compliance. In a word, a generalized pacifism must of necessity evaporate thanks to a combination of its own defenselessness and the cupidity of would-be tyrants.

Pacifism is destined to remain an unworkable system, that is, unless its advocates can prove self-interested individuals will never be tempted to resort to violence. But this cannot be proved. Clearly, never in all of history has this been the case. Nor are there biological reasons for believing it will be. The same applies to the neo-Marxists. Their egalitarian utopia cannot be maintained unless everyone remains egalitarian for all time. It is thus incumbent upon them to demonstrate that selfishness will never reemerge once their vision is realized. But how can they prove this? Obviously not by an appeal to human experience. There has never been a time or place where unselfishness has been universal. Nor have they demonstrated that human nature will change upon the arrival of their utopia. They can predict such a transformation, but predicting it is not the same as establishing it. Yes, they can imagine it, but the imagination is not reality. They can even persuade large numbers of people to believe in it, but belief is not reality either—no matter how widespread.

Then there is the little matter put forward by Lord Acton. He famously warned that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Unfortunately for the neo-Marxists, even they admit that the emergence of their egalitarian utopia must be facilitated by a cadre of the best and brightest. Free from the taint of false consciousness, these leaders will be among the first to realize that exploitation must be resisted. They will also be sufficiently gifted to organize an effective opposition. And yet if they are in charge—that is, if they have the power to initiate change— isn't it possible that they may be corrupted by this position? Maybe a naive belief that incorruptible leadership is on the horizon, that "social democracy" will bring egalitarian dreams to fruition, is doomed to disappointment. The mere act of steering a social system toward comprehensive equality may promote the inequality that is so loathed. Those who get a taste of leading a successful revolution may come to enjoy being in charge and conspire to remain there. This is what happened to Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Castro. Why would future neo-Marxist messiahs be different? Lord Acton had his doubts.

One of the strangest arguments in favor of the neo-Marxist position is that if you cannot prove something is impossible, then it must be achievable. Thus, if you cannot demonstrate that egalitarianism is unattainable, it must be within reach. We are periodically reminded that in the days before the Wright brothers, informed opinion asserted that powered flight was not feasible. Nevertheless, subsequent

events demonstrated that just because people said that heavier than air machines could not get off the ground did not mean it was so. This episode is presented as a cautionary tale that attests to the fact that *anything* is possible. Collectivists claim this specifically applies to egalitarianism. Merely because skeptics assert that it is impractical does not mean they are right. Doubts, however vociferously expressed, are not definitive.

This much, of course, is true. The skeptics might be wrong. But neither does this make them mistaken. While they cannot establish a negative, they can demonstrate that complete equality is improbable. Whereas no one can definitively confirm that something is completely beyond reach, they can corroborate that it is unlikely. Evidence can be produced that hierarchy has always been the norm for large societies and also that there are mechanisms that perpetuate ranking systems. On the other side of the equation, it is incumbent upon egalitarians to produce data supporting their speculations. It is not enough to place the onus on their detractors. Are there reasons why what they say is possible is, in fact, likely? Is there evidence to believe that it is even marginally possible? A desire to reach this endpoint, no matter how robust, does not count. Just because people want everyone to be equal cannot, of itself, make it so. Even children realize that wanting to fly by flapping one's arms does not produce liftoff. Nor will a sincere desire for total fairness automatically eventuate in justice. If the neo-Marxist account of the nature of social hierarchies is to attain credibility, it must be grounded in empirical observations. If its description of the causal mechanisms underlying inequality is to be plausible, it must not only claim to be scientific; it must seek corroboration congruent with the canons of science.

Science versus Philosophy

August Comte is credited with originating the designation "sociology." So confident was he in the power of this new discipline to explain the human condition that he lauded it as the "queen of the sciences." Nonetheless, he also sought to explain why the social sciences had been so tardy in arriving on the scene. Why had the modern emergence of science started with the physical sciences? One reason was the tendency of people to moralize human behavior. Instead of examining social conduct, they sought to influence its contours. In this, Comte was on to something. Human beings are moral animals. We care about the rules governing our behavior, and we seek to

affect our dimensions. Far from being disinterested investigators of the social scene, we are active participants in manipulating interpersonal activities. Indeed, we do not want to know what it means to say something is wrong so much as that this particular statement is a lie and that act violates a promise. Deeply immersed in the push and pull of enforcing moral principles, we seek to promote our own commitments, while opposing impositions deemed illegitimate.

The result is that we human beings often fail to distinguish descriptions from prescriptions. Patterns of behavior we wish to enforce are looked upon as facts rather than directives to action. What we want to happen is perceived as of necessity built into the fabric of the universe. It is as if the moral rules to which we are dedicated are laws of nature. Although David Hume long ago observed that it is logically impermissible to derive an "ought" from an "is," most people do this with dreary regularity. They consistently confuse what they want with what "should" happen. Prescriptions are bundled together with descriptions so that it is virtually impossible to tell where one begins and the other lets off. The situation with "exploitation" is all too frequent. The fact that some people get more than others, which is a description, is confounded with a desire that no one get more than any other, which is a prescription. Those who believe in equality assume that if there is inequality, this per se demonstrates that it is wrong. To borrow a term from the Declaration of Independence, they take it for granted that inequality is *self-evidently* wrong. Merely to witness inequality is to perceive that it is not a good. Although the philosopher G.E. Moore believed something like this, it is not valid. Moral judgments are not observable facts. They are injunctions to action that vary with time and place. If they are to be validated, the means of validating them differ from those needed to substantiate discernible facts.

Facts, as most scientists agree, are confirmed by observations and logical deductions derive from observations. One sees that passing a white light through a prism produces a rainbow and one deduces that the white light is composed of a variety of colors. Moral rules, in contrast, are socially constructed. Individuals, or more aptly groups of individuals, propound particular regulations, which are then opposed by standards propounded by other individuals, and negotiations ensue until a rough consensus emerges. This bargaining may take many years, or centuries, before an agreement is reached, but when it is, the community as a whole enforces the resultant requirements. Moreover, individuals internalize these standards and apply them to

themselves and others. They cultivate a conscience, which together with the consciences of their peers, stabilizes the prescriptions in which they concur. Part of this process, especially when the conclusion is in doubt, is the formation of orthodoxies within the coalitions contending for supremacy. Moral negotiations tend to be polarized; hence each side vigorously disputes the assertions of the other faction. Those who are for abortion hate those who are against it and consider them evil. Needless to say, their adversaries visit a similar judgment on them. Orthodoxies, that is, enforced consistencies of opinion, are useful in pursuing these quarrels. They keep the allies of each side on the same page and therefore make their collective efforts more potent.

How this operates is on display among the neo-Marxists. Although they claim to be scientists, they are actually apologists for a particular moral position. They say that they are in pursuit of facts, but their actions belie their words. The fundamental aims of neo-Marxists do not change. They have continued to promote an egalitarian utopia through revolutionary means for over two centuries. Unlike genuine scientists, they do not seek to clarify the causal mechanisms shaping social events, because they are already committed to a belief that corrupt elites create and sustain hierarchies. This, for them, is an orthodoxy. It is not subject to revision or alteration. When they seem to be doing research, appearances are deceptive. Like most moralists, their specialty is advocacy research. Time and again, they discover exactly what they intended to discover before they began their investigations. The goal is to contribute to the advance of a social movement, not to further science *per se*. By now entire libraries are stocked with studies that purport to demonstrate the ubiquity of exploitation. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, it is repeatedly established that some groups abuse and belittle others.

Genuine science, as opposed to advocacy, makes progress. In putting forth hypotheses and testing them against reality, it reaches conclusions that differ from the starting point. Part of the glory of science is that it has uncovered truths no one suspected before research began. Who in the Middle Ages realized that electricity and magnetism were intertwined phenomenon? Which of the scholastics would have imagined that ordinary light is a form of electromagnetic radiation? By the same token, before William Harvey, the heart was generally believed to be a furnace, not a pump. And before Watson and Crick, no one even conjectured that genetic information was encoded in the double helix of DNA. Genuine science makes modifications of this

sort. Genuine science is also open to disconfirmation. Despite his greatness, Newton has been supplemented by Einstein; and notwithstanding his ingenuity, Darwin has been refined by theories of punctuated equilibrium. In Newton's pregnant metaphor, scientists see further than their predecessors because they stand on the shoulders of giants. The same ought to be true of sociology. Nonetheless, its practitioners must begin by seeking the shoulders upon which to stand. If it is to be a genuine science, its explorations into the causal mechanisms that give us social hierarchies have to be open-minded investigations that build on earlier contributions. Only this will make it possible for them to lead in unexpected directions.

Too often the social sciences have functioned more like philosophies than sciences. They have promoted simple and apparently exhaustive answers based upon uncorroborated thought. Philosophers, as opposed to scientists, are typically more concerned with converting others to a particular viewpoint than with uncovering new truths. In his remarkable work on the sociology of philosophies, Randall Collins asserts that major instances of intellectual creativity are rare. More usually ancient ideas are recycled in new circumstances—a classic case of old wine in new bottles. The players then square off, much as moralists do, into competing intellectual communities, characteristically representing pro and con factions, albeit with an alternative system often in the wings. Because there is only so much attention space available to human beings, the focus of the parties is on that upon which they are already fixated. The competitors then act as if one side is good and the other evil, with each attempting to discredit the other. Yet instead of reaching an agreement upon which subsequent advances can be based, their understandings are generally supplanted by other intellectual structures as conditions change. The pattern is more like an alteration of fashions than a modification of hypotheses based on confirmation and disconfirmation. Collins documents this model over the course of several millennia for both Eastern and Western philosophies. It was strikingly present among the ancient Greeks, Chinese, and Indians. But it is also visible in contemporary sociology. Thus the late twentieth century witnessed the dramatic displacement of structural-functionalism by neo-Marxism. For much of the period, the two, with the latter usually designated “conflict theory,” seemed to fill the entire attention space of sociologists. When asked, what are you, members of the discipline understood that they were expected to proclaim their allegiance to one or the other. Sometimes one might

announce that he or she was a symbolic-interactionist, but this was a micro, as opposed to macro theory, which, in any event, the conflict theorists eventually attempted to co-opt. To be an independent thinker was to be an isolated adventurer whose contributions were unlikely to attract professional notice.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, as intellectuals became wary of the capitalist establishment, the neo-Marxists got the upper hand in academe. Theirs became the reigning orthodoxy. In sociology, the argument was that the functionalists, nominally represented by Talcott Parsons, could not account for social change and therefore were wrong. Their theories were alleged to fail the test of providing verifiable predictions. This, however, thoroughly misrepresented the functionalist position. As Daniel Chirot elegantly explains, functionalism is grounded in an evolutionary conception of change. That the functionalists were conservatives who are against change was a canard used to persuade the uninformed. Whatever the reason, as functionalism went into eclipse, the central commitments of the neo-Marxists came into favor. Merely to question the centrality of inequality was to reveal oneself a rebel within the fold. It was to invite criticism, and ultimately professional ostracism. As a consequence, only a few hardy souls dared contradict the new academic establishment. Most were content to gather scholarly laurels by restating what the neo-Marxists preached. This, however, was no way to extend the boundaries of social knowledge. It was certainly not an effective means of investigating the empirical nature of social hierarchies.

Not that there was complete unanimity among sociologists. A spate of books decried the crisis within the discipline, but did little to reverse the trend. These, such as that of Irving Louis Horowitz who roundly denounced *The Decomposition of Sociology*, recognized that ideology had supplanted science and pleaded for a return to more objective practices. Nonetheless, few listened. Another voice in dissent was that of Joseph Lopreato. He argued that a true science sought to establish, and then validate, scientific laws. Only these provided the disinterested explanations of natural phenomena central to science. Lopreato's model was Charles Darwin; hence he hoped that evolutionary principles would rescue sociology from the morass into which it had fallen. He specifically believed that this applied to the study of social stratification. One of his contentions was that dominance orders are natural for human societies. Another was that these orders are virtually universal—consequently, the reason why destratification

efforts regularly fail. The argument being proffered here is intended to enlarge upon Lopreato's thesis. It suggests that the best strategy for seeking natural laws is to begin with causal mechanisms. These can provide the conceptual frameworks needed to break out of the philosophical quagmire sucking the life out of sociology. Knowledge of how ranking systems operate can become a self-generating engine, that is, if the elements of hierarchy are recognized for what they are and studied much as force and mass were after Newton. Instead of rehearsing ancient fairytales about how the world should work, a vision of how stratification does work should make it possible to tread new ground.

What is remarkable about the study of human hierarchies is that progress in understanding them has not been stymied by a lack of data. If anything, the opposite is true. We are confronted with so much information about how people engage in ranking themselves that we suffer from intellectual indigestion. The feast surrounding us is so copious that investigators have not known where to begin. What is necessary is, therefore, not to rush out and engage in fresh researches, but rather to organize the data we have at hand. How do so many diverse pieces fit together into a consistent whole? Specifically, what do the mechanisms that enable human beings to construct and operate their social hierarchies look like? This is a daunting mission but not one beyond the grasp of sociologists prepared to set their moral commitments aside while entering upon it.



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