



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Lester Ward, “Social Classes” (1908)

“If all could have adequate opportunities, there would be no member of society incapable of performing some useful service.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article published by Lester F. Ward, one of the first American sociologists. The entire article is entitled “Social Classes in the Light of Modern Sociological Theory” and was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in March 1908 (volume 13, number 5, pp, 617-627). It has been abbreviated for publication here.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In contrast to his famed contemporary, Sumner, Ward thought sociology could be used to formulate progressive social policies. In this passage, Ward first lays out current sociological thinking on the origins of class and class conflict. In the full article, much of what Ward writes is in rejection of eugenicist ideas of race and class common in his day. What is included here is his analysis of inequalities, their social (versus biological) origin, and consequences thereof.

Social Classes and Inequalities

Many questions supposed to have been definitively settled have been revived and brought into new prominence under the searchlight of modern sociological theory. One of the time-worn social problems of this order is that of the origin and nature of social classes.

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

I refer now to the admitted natural inequalities of men. This is observed on every hand by all, and so ingrained is the idea that the lower classes of society are such by reason of these natural inequalities that there has never been any attempt to analyze the subject with a view to ascertaining whether this is really true or not. Whenever the abolition of social classes is hinted at it is pronounced utopian, and the common and

supposed final answer is that if we were to suppose them once really done away with, on account of the natural inequalities of people, they would almost immediately be restored, and every person would find their level. This usually closes the argument, and I have yet to see any attempt to answer it. And yet this is really such a superficial view that it falls to pieces upon the simplest inspection. It receives its death-blow the moment we recognize the obvious fact that all these natural inequalities are to be found in all classes and within every class, and that no degree of intellectual deficiency is ever sufficient to cause its possessor to be removed to a lower social class. The weakest minds occur in the highest classes, and Lord Dundrearys are by no means rare. This does not make them any the less lords. We might well wish that social classes were based on some such rational grounds as this theory assumes. Unfortunately, such is not the case, and not only are weak minds found in the higher classes, but, what is perhaps worse, strong minds are found in the lower, where they have no chance to work to any purpose.

As Professor Huxley said of the exceptional, "no one can say where they will crop up; like their opposites, the fools and knaves, they appear sometimes in the palace and sometimes in the hovel."

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

Now natural inequalities also have a powerful effect on society. It is not the opposite of that produced by artificial inequalities. It is entirely different. As we have seen, they have no tendency to produce social classes, but they permeate every class alike. Moreover, their effect, instead of being injurious, is highly beneficial. Natural inequalities rarely tend to make one person superior or inferior to another. They simply make us different from one another. This is highly desirable. Of course, there are brilliant minds and there are feeble minds. An excess of the latter quality relegates its victim to the class of social dependents. It becomes a pathological condition. Society cares for these wards, to whatever class they may belong. With them we have nothing to do. But the principal inequalities belong to normal minds. They simply represent mental differences. No two minds are exactly alike. Mind is capable of almost infinite variation. There may be a thousand varieties no one of which can be called inferior to another. Apparent inferiority is usually due to some peculiarity. Very few minds are perfectly balanced. Some faculties are developed at the expense of others. No normal and sane mind can be deficient in all its faculties. The faculty called "common-sense," the one which makes its possessor appear normal and sane, may be poorly developed, while some other mental power may be greatly in excess. There is a kind of intellectual compensation by which all are equal but in very different ways. Many great geniuses, as all know, have been deficient in the commoner qualities. There is probably no one who does not have some strong side if it could be known. Many no doubt fail during their whole lives to find expression for the chief powers that they possess. *If all could have adequate opportunities there would be no member of society incapable of performing some useful service.*

Now it is these very inequalities, however extreme, that cause the efficiency of the human race. The actions of people are a reflex of their mental characteristics. Where these differ so widely the acts of their possessors will correspondingly differ. Instead of all doing the same thing they will do a thousand different things. The natural and necessary effect of this is to give breadth to human activity. Every subject will be looked at from

all conceivable points of view, and no aspect will be overlooked or neglected. It is due to this multiplicity of view-points, growing out of natural inequalities in our minds, that civilization and culture have moved forward along so many lines and swept the whole field of possible achievement.

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

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

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

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

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. What is the difference between artificial and natural inequalities? To which belongs class?
2. Compare Ward to Durkheim, particularly Durkheim's discussion of pathological forms of the division of labor. Are they in agreement? Explain.
3. Many of the writers of this era came down on one side or another on the issue of socialism as a preferred (and inevitable) form of social and political arrangement. Where does Ward stand? How do you know? How does he connect his vision of sociology with this stance?