

BOOKS

ON THE ASPECTS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION*

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Bukodi E., Altorjai Sz. and Tallér A.: *A társadalmi rétegződés aspektusai*. [Aspects of Social Stratification.] Budapest: KSH Népeségtudományi Kutatóintézet, Társadalomstatistikai Füzetek 45., 2005.

The reader has the results of an exciting and ambitious research enterprise at hand. Associates of the Division of Social Statistics of the Central Statistical Office, in co-operation with the Institute of Demography, have attempted to create and analyze a comprehensive model (or rather models) offering a many-sided description of the Hungarian society. They have continued with this work a series the elements of which have matured to become classics and linked to the name of Zsuzsa Ferge, Tamás Kolosi and Ágnes Utasi.

Building on not one but two different theoretical traditions Bukodi et al. present two kinds of schemes of stratification structure: one of them is based on position in the labour market and on occupation, and the other one distributes members of the society into groups by consumption and lifestyle. They publish the two different models one after the other, built on different databases, stressing that they supplement each other, and neither of them can be regarded ‘more valid’ than the other.

The authors argue with the help of new international empirical results in support of the statement that the stratification schemes, based on occupation and the labor market have not lost of their significance to date, even though they may be regarded traditional and outdated by several authors. They consider the theoretical and methodological problems of the creation of this stratification typology, including the necessity of taking into account the relatively new social changes such as the large number of people present at the periphery of the labor market. After having listed the earlier and later attempts of Hungarian statistical practice to take the population into account on the basis of occupational structure, they present their own social-occupational stratification scheme (CSO–SOSS) the development of which can be understood from one of their earlier publications (Bukodi E. and Záhonyi M.: *A társadalom rétegződése*. Népszámlálás 25. [The Stratification of the Society. Census 25.] Budapest, KSH,

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2004.). The aim of the present paper is to study how far the classification evolved is able to grasp the different forms of social inequalities.

The authors have primarily relied on the proposal of the Eurostat experts (and the EGP scheme used in it), besides Zsuzsa Ferge's image of the new capitalist society when they developed the model. The end result has been a classification separating four major categories (employers, autonomous ones/self-employed, employees, dropouts), to be further divided into 7, 11, 14, and finally 35 sub-groups. Next they study the structure of Hungarian society and its changes in time by employing the 14-category variant of this classification. Surveying the changes that have taken place in the stratification structure between 1983 and 2002, they draw the conclusion that it is the polarisation of the occupational structure that has been in progress in Hungary: the growth of the weight of jobs requiring high qualifications is accompanied by the growth of the numerical proportion of certain unskilled groups (such as the unskilled employees of the servicing sphere). The study of the different groups in the stratification by educational level is also quite enlightening. It well presents the effect of school expansion as a diploma ever more frequently qualifies 'only' for lower level positions (lower grade manager, clerical staff, highly qualified technician).

The theoretical significance and practical usability of social stratification schemes is indicated not the least by how far they are capable of forecasting certain social characteristics, attitudes and activities. Here the authors only study aspects of the material living conditions and the spending of leisure time of the possible 'consequential variables'. According to earlier experience the interrelationship between occupational position and material conditions has become stronger to a large extent after the change of the system in Hungary. Here the concept of material living conditions is to be understood rather broadly: it includes the possession of consumer durables, immovable property, the characteristics of material consumption, as well as financial security. The authors have reached the conclusion by a multivariate analysis (linear regression, the dependent variable of which is an aggregate index developed out of the possession of valuables and of material consumption) that SOSS is an excellent explanation of the material situation even if a series of other characteristics are also controlled for. The social strata evolved can be arranged in a sort of hierarchy regarding their material situation, and the internal homogeneity of the groups may be taken as relatively good. Surely it is not surprising that this classification is best capable of grasping inequalities among those who are employed, whereas the situation of people out of work due to various reasons is influenced only to a moderate extent by their latest occupational and labour market position. The authors present, once again successfully, the correlation between the risk of becoming unemployed and of the characteristics of material status, as well as changes of living conditions and SOSS. It is unclear, however, why the authors have not studied income, one of the indicators of material status that is in the most direct relationship with occupational status, being determined by the position in the occupational stratification.

The next chapter studies the effects of the social-occupational stratum position exercised on time-using habits and cultural life. They studied the proportion of leisure-time in the time structure and has reached the conclusion that it is only very moderately influenced by position occupied in the stratification. The way of spending

leisure is a different issue, though the various forms of activity are not necessarily reflected as hierarchical differences in the stratification structure. For instance, it is the highly educated intellectuals and managers that spend the least time on watching television. Compared to them the big and medium entrepreneurs as well as semi-skilled employees spend about one and half times as much on the same activity.

The authors, after having surveyed the various modes of spending leisure, created a continuous index of "leisure status", so that, as earlier in the case of the material status, they may study its correlation with position occupied in the stratum. Their conclusion, however, differs from the one drawn in the case of material status: what they find is that no unambiguous hierarchy among the strata emerges on the basis of the leisure status index, and rather big differences may be experienced even within the individual strata. When assessing this result one may suspect that the manner the index was produced could also be responsible for it. In fact the authors have assembled rather heterogeneous forms of activity in one bunch and their correlation is by far not obvious. In fact the assumption does not seem to be theoretically well founded nor empirically (statistically) proved sufficiently that reading habits, high culture consumed outside the home, social activities, friendly relations, physical exercise and watching television should be organized into a single index (factor).

After the stratification model based on occupation one may get acquainted with stratification models based on consumption and lifestyle. This is called "*stratification-aspect*" model by the authors. Whereas the "*lifestyle-deprivation*" index (based on the research of the Institute of Demography entitled *Turning Points of Our Life*) stresses deficiency and deprivation. Here it is particularly important if someone does not possess something (does not do an activity) because it cannot be afforded.

Society was divided on the basis of three dimensions when developing both schemes. They are the following: characteristics of life determined by material conditions, leisure/cultural activities, and those of the use of housing. An aggregate variable was made for both cases to measure the three dimensions, followed by arranging the population in groups on the basis of the three indices, with the help of cluster analysis. Both schemes outline a rather unambiguous hierarchy with altogether ten and nine strata respectively. These hierarchies are topped by a more or less consistent upper group, whereas at the bottom there are the "dropouts", who can be regarded as deprived both in their financial as well as housing conditions, and also in respect of their habits of spending their leisure. Both classifications estimate the proportion of those in an expressly disadvantageous position to be around 30 per cent. There is a difference, however, between the two, for the approach based on stratification differentiates more at the top of the hierarchy, whereas the other one based on deprivation more vigorously differentiates in the lower regions.

Despite the partial differences between the results the necessity of the evolution of two kinds of typology is not fully convincing. Do not the possibility of access to various goods ("stratification aspect" approach) and its missing due to financial reasons ("lifestyle deprivation" approach) reflect two sides of the same coin? The "deprivation" approach, based on the database of the Institute of Demography, obviously contains basic information beyond the cause of deprivation showing

whether someone does or does not possess the given goods (possibility). Though the sphere of usable indicators is somewhat narrower at this database, no obstacle whatsoever can be sensed in the way of the index created on that basis to possessing all the characteristics of the stratification-based as well as of the deprivation index. In addition certain questions emerge in relation to the manner the applied deprivation-based distribution was evolved. In that case the authors have applied the marking “does not possess the given goods because their material conditions are non-existent” = 0 point; “does not possess for other – non-material – reasons” = 1 point; “does not possess because the person does not feel its need” = 2 points; “does possess” = 3 points. In my view the hierarchical nature of the four categories of response is highly questionable. It is particularly less understandable why a distinction was necessary to be made between the answers “other, non-financial reason” and “does not feel its need” and why the answer would ‘deserve’ more points than the other one. (Why is a person more “deprived” who does not have a car because of environmental considerations than another one who has no car because he/she does not need it?)

At any rate, several of the groups evolved can be well characterized by the age, life cycle, family status, school education, or social and consumption position in the stratification of their members. For instance, the proportion of those not older than 35, living as singles is much above the average in the *consumption-oriented upper middle stratum* and about 40 per cent of the group-members are diploma-holders. And to give another example: *the poor with good flats and the small existences with good flats* often come from the age group above 60; and those with a maximum of 8 completed years of primary education are strongly over-represented in the first group.

Next the authors present the correlations between the patterns of the use of time as well as the various value attitudes and the lifestyle groups. The two-variable correlations are once again most frequently supplemented by regression estimates. Part of the results related to the use of time is not new: because part of the variables used for developing groups itself referred to modes of the use of leisure, thus naturally relatively homogenous groups were (also) made, for instance in respect to dispensing with leisure. The lifestyle typology, for instance, also has a good explanatory force concerning the proportion of time spent alone or at home.

The study of the occurrence of different value attitudes in the various lifestyle groups also shows marked differences. Of the sets of values identified by the research the family-focused attitude, for instance, is the strongest in the group of the *consistently poor*, whereas it is least characteristic in the *consumption-oriented upper middle stratum*; whereas the situation is (almost) the reverse in respect to the value set of self-realization. Next definite distinctions are outlined in relation to gender roles and the principles of child rearing. As far as the latter one is concerned the result may seem paradoxical, but in fact rather understandable that *making children enjoy hard work* turned out to be the most important precisely in the groups the members of which occupy the most insecure positions of the labor market (“*dropouts*” and “*consistently poor*”). Finally, the various groups are well separated from one another also by how far anomie way of thinking is characteristic of them and what the mental state of their members is like.

The observation that the education of parents proves to be decisive in many respects of the life of individuals in adult society is worth considering among the results of the various regression estimates. Social origin is found to be correlated with time-budget, anomic thinking and also with mental state – even when belonging to a lifestyle-group, demographic factors (age, gender, number of children, type of household), economic factors (labor market activity, income) as well as educational level are controlled for. All this should be seriously considered, for the statement extends over the entire adult population and not only of the youngest ones, and that autonomous effects are also involved in *addition to* the well known strong correlation between the education of parents and their children.

The paper colorfully proves the initial assumption of the authors that the structure of the society can be described along various considerations, and the stratification schemes built on different approaches, are useful in grasping different aspects of social inequalities. It is regrettable however that the reader cannot learn whether the stratification scheme of Bukodi et al. does differently or perhaps better demonstrate the differences present in society if compared to other classifications. The claim primarily emerges in relation to the stratification model of social-occupational basis, for it would be good to see similar analyses in which the place of the CSO–SOSS would be taken up, for instance, by the EGP class scheme or by Zsuzsa Ferge's model, and then comparisons made between the results thus obtained. Yet, it is expected and hoped that both the stratification models presented, and particularly the one based on the labor market and occupation, would be a useful and frequently used tool in the hands of the makers of future researches.