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*Stratification in Plural Societies*¹

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN one talks about stratification, one is talking about structure. When one talks about plural societies, one is usually talking about ethnic or cultural categories (Morris 1957). It will become evident in the course of this paper that the use of ethnic and cultural criteria to differentiate sections of a society will not give us a clear description of the strata within it, nor enable us to see with clarity the relations between strata. To do this one must turn from cultural labels toward the major political and economic structures of the whole society.

THE CONCEPT OF THE PLURAL SOCIETY

The term "plural society" which is associated with the writings of J. S. Furnivall (1944, 1945, 1948) has gained wide currency in the last few years. On the one hand it has been hailed "as essential for comparative sociology" (M. G. Smith 1960:763) and "as a field of crucial and strategic importance for sociological theory" (Rex 1959:114). On the other hand, it has been criticized as "misleading because it concentrates attention upon differences in race and custom and upon group conflict while at the same time directing attention away from the processes making for unity and integration in the society" (R. T. Smith 1958). "To emphasise plurality may also encourage people to look on societies with minority problems as if they did not have coherent social systems that are strictly comparable with societies that do not have 'minority problems'" (Morris 1957:125).

A difficulty has lain in the attempt to push the concept to cover all sorts of differences in culture and institutions within a society. Every society has pluralistic aspects in the sense that different values and attitudes are produced by any functioning social system (Braithwaite 1960:821). In this sense, pluralism is apt to become a synonym for "complex." A second difficulty arising from the first has been the attempt to describe all societies which contain more than one ethnic or cultural category in terms of pluralism. This has led M. G. Smith, for example, to describe the United States and Brazil as "heterogeneous societies that contain plural communities and evince pluralism without themselves being plural societies" (1960:771). This difficulty has bedeviled both the 1960 conference on Pluralism in the Carribean and the 1957 INCIDI conference on pluralism in tropical territories. Underlying these difficulties is the fallacy of thinking that pluralism is an analytical concept, whereas it is a simple classificatory one.

The term has been most successfully used when applied to single societies. Freedman (1960) assumes that his readers know the meaning of "plural society" and applies it, only indirectly defined, to Malaya. Both H. S. Morris (1956) for East Africa and E. P. Skinner (1960) for British Guiana stress the inadequacy of the concept of a plural society. Yet their analyses of its shortcomings give excellent insights into the complexity of the problems of such societies. It is as a label for multi-racial societies that I believe the term plural society has its place; "it has the merit of summarizing in two words a series of very complex problems" (R. T. Smith 1961:155).

Stratification

One of these very complex problems concerns stratification. Let us begin by attempting to see how far the sections of a plural society, defined in ethnic and/or cultural terms make up significant categories for stratification. Are they, in Nadel's terms, aggregates of individuals who share in relevant respects the same status and are marked off from other aggregates by different status? (1951:174). Can they be said to be groups or quasi-groups or potential groups, to use Ginsberg's term (1934), and, if so, in what contexts? Using ethnic and/or cultural criteria alone I do not think we can distinguish such groups. The difficulties will appear if we attempt to do so in a specific context.

MAURITIUS

Mauritius is an island of 720 square miles in the Indian Ocean. Its economy is almost entirely based on the production and sale of sugar. Upwards of 630,000 people inhabit this British colony which is moving rapidly towards self-government.

Sixty-seven percent of the population of Mauritius is of Indian origin; twenty-eight percent is Creole, i.e., of mixed African and/or Indian and European descent; three percent is Chinese; and two percent is European or of European origin.² Each of these ethnic categories can be further subdivided: the Indians into Hindus and Muslims and five linguistic categories, the Creoles according to color, the Chinese into Christian and non-Christian, and the Europeans into English and French. Mauritius is a plural society, but the principles in general use to mark off the sections within it are varied. Thus I have just used ethnic origin, language, color, national origin, and religion to differentiate sections of the population. These are all basically ascribed statuses.

Ethnic and Cultural Criteria

Are there any grounds for seeing even a vague sort of group consciousness (Lowie 1948, MacIver 1950) on the basis of such criteria? Ethnic origin is perhaps the primary index of differentiation in ordinary conversation in Mauritius, though it is often fused with the notion of color. By ethnic origin one can distinguish categories deriving from Europe, Africa, India, and China. There is, however, a large category whose antecedents were both African and European

which it is difficult to place in such a simple classificatory system. A further difficulty is the long residence of all categories except the Britons in Mauritius, so that strictly speaking all are of Mauritian birth and nationality. Yet, except to foreigners or when overseas, few Mauritians identify themselves or others as Mauritian. Instead they use an appellation of nationality, religion, color, or some finer distinction of caste, sect, or linguistic origin. It depends on the context which sort of appellation is used, for they are not all mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, primary identification is nearly always with a section smaller than the total national group. In this there is a difference in degree rather than kind from societies in which individuals identify themselves with a tribe or kin-group (cf. Morris 1957).

Language

If we take language as a criterion differentiating sections of the population, we find that each ethnic section has a language or group of languages associated with it. Yet, within sections, finer distinctions can be made on the basis of linguistic origin, and several languages traverse linguistic and ethnic origins and provide links between communities. Language can become symbolic of the differentiation between sections in a political context, as disputes in Mauritius, India, and other countries have shown. Language can also become symbolic of upward social mobility. A rise in the social and economic scale in Mauritius often leads to the abandonment of the local Creole *patois* or of an Indian language in favor of French or English. This is an example of the way in which cultural traits of those in the upper social strata are used as reference points for those lower down. It demonstrates the necessity of looking at a plural society as a single social system and not as separate social systems only making contact in the economic sphere as Furnival (1944) maintains.

Religion

If we turn to religion we note similar phenomena, for each ethnic section has one or more religions associated with it. Yet within sections there are many distinctions of ceremony and sect, and a number of religions traverse linguistic and ethnic boundaries. As with language, religion can become an important political symbol in some contexts differentiating political blocs. It can also become symbolic of upward social mobility by conversion to Christianity. In Mauritius only the Christian religions have significant representation in each of the major ethnic sections.

Awareness of other religions is one of the characteristics of the plural society as found in Mauritius. This means not only awareness of differences but of similarities. Beliefs and practices of one religion are often rationalized in terms of another. In this it is usually the religions of the lower strata, Hinduism and Islam, which are rationalized in terms of the higher, Christianity. In the villages, all of which are multi-racial, one rarely hears the adherent of one religion dismissing another religion as idle superstition. Instead there is a belief in the possible efficacy of other religions, particularly of certain saints, deities,

and rituals. Vows are often made to saints of other religions. Thus the knowledge of other religions is an important part of the belief systems of many Mauritians, and again emphasizes the importance of treating the whole society as a single social system. Mitchell (1960) has noted the incorporation of apparently conflicting values into a single social system in the plural societies of Central Africa.

Such criteria as ethnic origin, language, and religion are only significant group determinants in a political context, that is in a context which looks at the political structure of the whole society. Here they become symbolic not so much of cultural separateness as of lower political status. If Roman Catholicism and the Church of England receive government subsidies in Mauritius, Indians want similar subsidies for Hinduism and Islam. If French and English are taught in schools, there are Indian demands for Urdu, Tamil, and Hindi.

Nadel's definition of social strata as aggregates of individuals who share in relevant respects the same status, leads us to ask what the relevant features are. As Nadel is at pains to point out, they do not refer to all physiological and behavioral differences, but chiefly to access to political status and wealth. It is in these contexts that ethnic and cultural differences can become important because they can serve as symbols of differential status.

This can be seen in the use of stereotypes to define social distance and differential status. As Morris (1956) has shown in East Africa, members of one section tend to regard other sections as undifferentiated.

Stereotypes

In Mauritius the Franco-Mauritian refers to "les indiens" and is scarcely aware of the many differences of caste, sect, and linguistic origin which differentiate such a category. Similarly, the Indian is unaware of the many social gradations among "les blancs." Both tend to regard the Chinese as similarly undifferentiated. Such stereotypes must be assessed in the context in which they are uttered. The Chinese shopkeeper will be aware of many of the distinctions among the Indians and Creoles in the village in which he has his shop. The Franco-Mauritian estate manager may be similarly aware of distinctions among the laborers inhabiting his estate camp. In a Franco-Mauritian drawing-room white and black are adequate distinctions, but in politics Hindu and Muslim may be more significant, while in the occupational sphere Indian and Creole may become the important categories. The tendency for individuals of one section of the plural society to look on the others as undifferentiated appears to be a function of lack of communication between individuals of different sections. It is most pronounced where the social distance is greatest. From the Franco-Mauritian drawing-room the Indian village is socially remote. Physically it is rarely more than a quarter of a mile. Where social contact is more frequent and sustained, this undifferentiated stereotype breaks down. The Chinese shopkeeper knows not only the ethnic and religious differences among his clientele but their individual differences in wealth and power.

From this brief survey it can be seen that such factors as ethnic origin,

language, and religion do not mark off congruent categories. They may be indices of a certain "consciousness of kind" (Giddings 1896). They provide some measure of social distance and can be activated as symbols in certain political contexts. Are there any grounds for ranking the ethnic sections? In Mauritius only the European element would be placed with any certainty. There is a consensus that they are on top. In fact, of course, only some of them are on top. Their cultural traits are prestigious and are adopted by individuals of other sections who are attempting to rise. Below the top there is less agreement as to ranking *on the basis of ethnic or cultural criteria alone*. From the European point of view either all the other ethnic sections fail to meet their racial standards or some sections meet cultural standards more than others. Individuals in each non-European section tend to rank their section above other non-European sections.

So far in this discussion I have been using only ethnic and cultural criteria to differentiate sections of the plural society. I do not think the effort has been very productive. I have been unable to distinguish groups or describe a system of stratification. It is hardly surprising that in dealing with cultural phenomena the social structure does not emerge. What is surprising is to find those who think pluralism is an analytical concept, believing that a description of cultural categories is a way of analyzing the relations between the categories. To do this one must turn from cultural labels—including, I believe, even the institutions of, say, religion and kinship which may characterize one section, and which I have not treated—towards the major political and economic institutions of the total society. The Europeans in Mauritius do not hold their positions at the top of the social hierarchy because of ethnic or cultural characteristics, but because they control the political, legal, and economic machinery of the island.

Economic Structure

It is in an economic context that Furnival saw the meeting of the various sections within a plural society, each of which was economically specialized. It is in an economic context that Ginsberg and others see the primary determinants of social strata. It is by examining the economic structure of the whole society that we should be able to discern significant strata and the relations between them. We should also be able to see how ethnic and cultural characteristics affect an individual's position in the economic structure, including his opportunities for mobility within it.

Occupationally, Mauritius is traditionally described as ethnically stratified with top positions in the hands of Europeans, Creoles as clerks and artisans, Chinese and Muslims as traders, and Hindus as laborers. This is, of course, an over-simplification, but even if it approximates the occupational structure, it cannot persist over time unless backed by strong political measures, as in South Africa. Economic classes develop within ethnic categories which can be differentiated not only by income but because they adopt distinctive forms of behavior. They become status groups in Weber's sense. Such behavior is

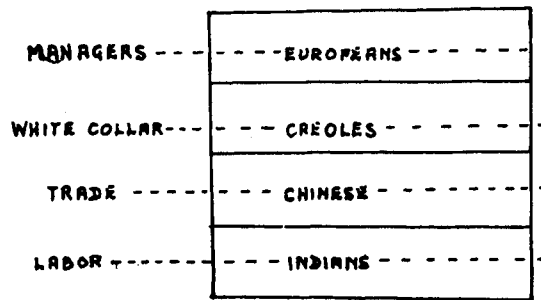
imitable. It crosses ethnic boundaries so that, political conditions always permitting, the society becomes class stratified.

I doubt if the ethnic sections of a society are ever completely undifferentiated economically, but indentured laborers arriving penniless under similar conditions of servitude come close to it. How did Indians in this position in Mauritius develop differential economic status? One way was by becoming an overseer who received higher wages and double rations. Overseers achieved their positions by being appointed by estate managers, by recruiting labor onto the estates from the immigration depots, or by being "elected" by the laborers themselves. They often advanced loans to laborers at interest. Another way Indians could rise economically was through concessions granted by estate owners or managers to keep livestock or grow vegetables. One of the motives from the estate owner's point of view was to keep a laborer nearing the end of his indenture attached to the estate. Indians with such concessions could and did become market gardeners and milk and egg sellers. More important still were the opportunities which Indians had to acquire cane land. These lands were initially in the form of concessions from estates. Often such lands were uneconomic for the estate because of rocky soil or poor irrigation, but they were not uneconomic for the Indian using family labor. (See Benedict 1958a.) The land provided was on a share-cropping basis with the proviso that all canes be crushed at the estate owner's mill. During periods of economic depression³ Indians were able to acquire land on long term purchase agreements, payments being deducted from the proceeds of the cane sent to the mill. In all these ways Indians were able to acquire wealth. With this wealth they were able to train their sons for government service and the professions. There thus grew up within the Indian section of the plural society a series of economic classes which to some extent began to cut across traditional categories of differentiation, such as caste and linguistic origin. At the top of the hierarchy this facilitates contacts between sections. Muslim importers, big Hindu planters, Franco-Mauritian estate owners, British bankers and exporters, big Chinese merchants have economic interests in common. Such interests are leading to increased social contacts. Similar contacts also develop within the professions between doctors, lawyers, and teachers of different ethnic categories.⁴ Even at the lower levels occupational specialization by ethnic category seems to be breaking down. There is still a predominance of Chinese in the retail trade, a predominance of Indians in agricultural pursuits, a predominance of Creoles among craftsmen and related workers. Nevertheless no ethnic category is exclusively confined to a single set of occupations. There are opportunities for mobility from one sort of occupation to another, though as yet access to certain jobs—such as managerial and technical jobs within the sugar industry—are confined to one ethnic section. Economically and occupationally Mauritius appears to be changing from a society which is ethnically stratified with each ethnic section confined to a single set of occupations to a society which is economically stratified with each ethnic section pursuing a whole range of occupations. This is an emerging structure. More top positions are still to be found

among Europeans; more lower positions are still to be found among Hindus; retail trade is still largely the province of the Chinese. It will be noted that this transformation does not necessarily abolish the plurality of the society. The distinction between ethnic sections may remain, and this means that there will be several upper classes, not a single one embracing all sections. Nevertheless, the possibility exists for the rapprochement of communities on class lines rather than on purely ethnic, religious, or linguistic ones.

The process can be represented diagrammatically as follows (Fig. 1): This is oversimplified. The traders do not necessarily rank below the white collar workers. From the point of view of remuneration they rank well above

1. TRADITIONAL.



2. TRANSITIONAL.

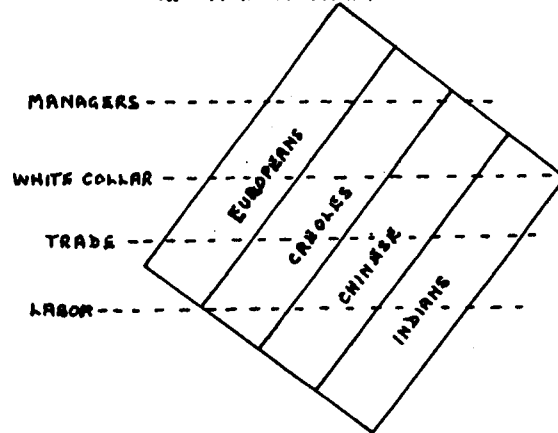


FIG. 1.

them, but from the point of view of prestige and educational qualifications, which are among the prime indices of prestige, white collar workers rate higher. They are also apt to have more political influence.

In the transitional phase the occupational structure begins to rotate through 90 degrees. As it does so, the lines differentiating ethnic categories become blurred notably in the managerial, trading, and laboring categories. In the white collar category, however, which is one of the chief avenues of upward social mobility, the lines may become more pronounced owing to competition for jobs. The competition between Creoles and Indians in this sphere is marked in Mauritius.

Access to Occupation

In the occupational sphere we are dealing primarily with statuses of achievement. In discussing the plural society we need to look at how far ethnic origin, or the adherence to a particular religion—in other words statuses of ascription—fosters or inhibits access to certain occupations.

Certain cultural characteristics may inhibit or foster access to certain occupations. Thus, Hindus in Mauritius do not become shoemakers or leather workers, but leave this to Muslims and Creoles. Muslims may be butchers, but they leave pig slaughtering to Creoles or Chinese. The fact that the upper reaches of commerce and government are conducted in English and to a lesser extent in French, makes it easier for native speakers of these languages to gain access and inhibits access to those brought up speaking a Chinese or an Indian language. The degree to which such factors limit access to economic status will vary with different societies, within different sections of one society, and over time. In Mauritius it would appear that such factors are diminishing with the increased opportunities for education and mobility in the occupational sphere. (See Benedict 1958b)

A chief factor inhibiting or fostering access is wealth. Lipset and Bendix (1959) have described a syndrome of poverty, lack of education, absence of personal contacts with the powerful, lack of planning, and failure to explore fully the available job opportunities. The process is no different in plural societies except that the poor can be ethnically, religiously, or linguistically differentiated from the wealthy. As I have shown, even this does not persist over time. If one looks at the relevant groups controlling economic opportunity they turn out to be not ethnic groups but something much less comprehensive, i.e., they do not include all members of a particular ethnic division but only a portion of the ethnic division associated on a basis of kin ties, economic association, or some other criterion. Not all Franco-Mauritians are rich and control the sugar industry. Certain Franco-Mauritian families do. Similarly for Chinese merchants and Gujerati importers. Thus the relevant factor of ascription, as far as access to economic opportunity is concerned, is not membership of an ethnic unit per se, but as Parsons (1940) pointed out more than 20 years ago, membership in a kinship unit.

Political Structure

A characteristic of societies described as plural is the concentration of political power and legal machinery in one ethnic section. Sometimes the other ethnic sections suffer legal disabilities and so approximate to the estates of feudal and post-feudal Europe and the ancient world (Ginsberg 1934:165). This is the case in South Africa and has been the case in Mauritius and elsewhere, where indentured laborers were subject to special laws defining their status. At a later stage in Mauritius, laws were no longer phrased in ethnic terms, but had the same effect. Thus, property and literacy qualifications on voting had the effect of disenfranchising most Indians until 1948. Various schemes of communal voting in a number of countries also give differential politico-legal status to different sections of the population.

The development of a series of economic classes cutting across ethnic boundaries in Mauritius has led to political alignments on a class basis. In the Mauritius Labour Party Creole dock workers are allied with Indian agricultural laborers. The leadership of the party includes both Indian and Creole intellectuals. The conservative *Parti Mauricien* allied Franco-Mauritian planters with wealthy Gujerati Muslim importers.

Ethnic and cultural characteristics can become symbols of political allegiance driving the sections apart. Though it was in the economic interests of wealthy Gujerati Muslims to support the *Parti Mauricien*, many poor Muslim followed their lead because they feared political domination by Hindus in the labor party. The position of the dominant ethnic section is obviously significant. It may bring about an alliance of diverse sections against it, as has been the case in many colonial territories. In Malaya, as Freedman (1960) has pointed out, nationalism was a factor creating pan-Malayan ethnic blocs out of what were merely ethnic categories.

In this sort of situation, access to political power can often be obtained by stressing or emphasizing the cultural peculiarities of a given section as opposed to other sections. (See Benedict 1957.) There are thus possibilities for individuals to gain positions of power by emphasizing the separateness of sections and becoming leaders against the dominant sections. There are also opportunities for individuals to gain power by approximating the norms of the dominant section and becoming government servants. In Mauritius, and elsewhere, it is striking how individuals can switch from one to the other of these roles. In general, in Mauritius and elsewhere, the leader who emphasizes only traditional values and statuses of one section seems to be losing out to the leader who has achieved high occupational status in the dominant total system. In Mauritius, Western educational and occupational achievement is a more important ladder upward than high traditional status. (See Benedict 1958b.)

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have tried to examine social stratification in plural societies. I began by looking at the various statuses of ascription such as ethnic group,

religion, and language by which the sections of a plural society are usually differentiated. I found that for Mauritius, and I believe for most other societies, corporate groups cannot be differentiated on this basis, but they sometimes serve as symbols which differentiate blocs in certain political contexts.

A more fruitful approach was to be found in examining the economic and political structures of the total society. Economically I found increasing differentiation within each section over time with a tendency for economic classifications to cross ethnic boundaries. Where the political climate permitted there arose a number of parallel economic classes and the vertical barriers between sections tended to diminish notably at the top, though in the positions just below the top competition may be increased. The society began to change from one which is ethnically stratified, with each ethnic section confined to a single set of occupations, to a society which is economically stratified with each section pursuing a whole range of occupations. Thus plurality tended to diminish.

Much depends on the political structure of the society. Where ethnic sections suffer political and legal disabilities they tend to be driven apart, and political leaders tend to represent one section only. In other cases there may be alliances of nonprivileged sections against a dominant section of leaders and parties arising which are based on economic class rather than ethnic affiliation.

Pluralism appears to be unstable. Where political and economic conditions permit, pluralism tends to break down. Communication between sections increases and common cultural forms develop. Groups and institutions cutting across sections foster this tendency toward fusion. Where political and economic opportunities are distributed on the basis of ascribed ethnic or cultural status divisive tendencies develop. In the societies we describe as plural there are always tendencies in both directions.

NOTES

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² Based on the 1952 Census. The percentages for Creoles and Europeans are approximations, as the census does not distinguish these categories.

³ These same economic depressions also tended to differentiate the European estate owners, many of whom were ruined, so that there was social mobility downward.

⁴ Similar processes have been noted in other plural societies: East Africa (Morris 1956, Gutkind 1957), Trinidad (Crowley 1957), British Guiana (Skinner 1960), Surinam (Van Lier 1957).

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