Status Evaluation in a Philippine Town: Some Preliminary Observations

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Introduction

Philippine social science has made frequent use of concepts of class and status but has often confused their meanings, thereby making inconsistent applications of these two fundamental sociological distinctions. Inequalities in the distribution of society's resources have usually been described and analyzed by using models of stratification in which overt indices such as income, education and race have been employed to identify hierarchical systems of discrete strata. Although socio-economic status has been utilized to delineate these strata, they have generally been designated as classes. However, this kind of approach is of limited sociological value as it assumes the existence of strata from the outset; it fails to distinguish between class and status; it cannot offer adequate explanations of change; and it gives little insight into the process of resource allocation and status perception.

Some of the problems and deficiencies of this functionalist methodology will be demonstrated in this article which is principally concerned with the exploration of a few basic but neglected matters in the sociology of Philippine inequality. My main aims are to investigate the conceptualization of inequality in a community and to assess the role of status as a mode of group formation. It is not intended here to enter into a discussion about the indices of status. The data was gathered in San Fernando, a regional urban centre of North-west Luzon, but I believe that many of my observations and conclusions have relevance for a wider area.

As a preliminary step it is necessary to establish several important conceptual distinctions. Because the article is concerned with conscious models of reality, my attention is focused on status. According to W.G. Runciman, "Inequality of status, therefore, covers those differences in social attributes and styles of life which are accorded higher or lower prestige." Beteille further notes that "Status relates to the esteem and respect accorded to qualities and positions which are valued in themselves." Both of these definitions are in various ways associated with Weber's tripartite distinction of class, status and power. However, it should be realized that these three analytic categories, although interrelated, are not synonymous and so inequalities of class, status and power need not coincide. Class is concerned with relationships in the economic system while examination of power seeks to identify the significant ways in which persons can determine and manipulate the behaviour, beliefs and perceptions of others. A final distinction separates inequality and strat-
The former refers to the unequal distribution of societal resources among a population while the latter is the organization of a society or community into a system of hierarchical strata according to the application of some ranking criterion or criteria.

Discussion

In any discussion of status it is important to identify the constructs which people utilize to order their observations of inequality. The language of a country or region provides useful evidence for this purpose as it indicates the nature of the concepts which are available for interpreting the unequal distribution of scarce resources. For example, in Britain class terminology is in constant common usage. People can be located in classes, housing can be described as middle class, working class culture can be indicated, and persons can be said to have a lower middle class outlook. In San Fernando, and indeed in the Philippines, there was a relative absence of such class terminology. One would encounter little or no spontaneous reference to class in the town while politics had never been framed in class terms. Even the adopted Spanish work klase, meaning 'class, sort or type', was not used in connection with social groups, a situation which contrasts with the Latin American experience where social science, politics and society have long utilized the word clase to delineate particular categories of persons.

Present-day Iloko, the indigenous language of lowland Northwest Luzon, shows a dearth of terms which could be applied to distinguish status strata or social classes. Vanoverbergh’s dictionary claims that the words kailian and timmawa both carry the meaning ‘lower class’ but I found that not only were the terms not used by the inhabitants of the town, but they were also not recalled. A more recent dictionary did not list either word. The important class and status associations of the Spanish colonial categories principalia, peninsulares and criollos had fallen into disuse by the early twentieth century and other terms denoting classes or status strata had not entered into common usage. A few highly generalized phrases such as common tao, which translates as ‘common man’, figured prominently in everyday speech but no Iloko or Spanish-derived terms admitting of any specificity were present in people’s vocabulary. There were, however, a number of Iloko words, derived from the same base, which meant ‘stratum’ or ‘layer’ (ap-ap, palonapin, rutap, ratip, apila, apli) but none of these words could be applied to social strata. Even the verbs maidasig, ‘to be segregated into classes’, and agrurutap, ‘to lie in strata’, could not be utilized to describe social structure.

The importation of Western class terminology has not been a feature of twentieth-century Philippine history. In San Fernando, the English phrase ‘middle class’ was sometimes heard and to a lesser extent ‘lower class’ and ‘upper class’ were met in conversation and discussion. However, when definitions for the terms were requested, vague and conflicting answers resulted. Furthermore, those who used or had knowledge of these terms were generally persons of high educational attainment who possessed at least a partial background in the social sciences. Even then it was not uncommon for these educated individuals to state that classes existed in England but were not to be found in the Philippines.