

First published 2005  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

© 2005 Wendy Bottero

Typeset in Baskerville by  
Taylor & Francis Books  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced  
or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means,  
now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording,  
or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in  
writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Bottero, Wendy, 1965–

Stratification: Social division and inequality / Wendy Bottero.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-28178-4 (hardcover) –

ISBN 0-415-28179-2 (softcover)

1. Stratification: Social division and inequality. I. Title.

HM821.B68 2005

305-dc22

2004013653

ISBN 0-415-28178-4 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-28179-2 (pbk)

Univerzita Karlova v Praze  
Knihovna společenských věd  
Praha 5 - Jinonice

## Contents

*List of illustrations*

vii

*Acknowledgements*

viii

### Part 1

#### Foundations

1

1 Stratification and social distance

3

2 Images of inequality

15

3 Founding ideas

33

4 Sins of the fathers

52

5 Name, rank and number: measuring stratification

68

### Part 2

#### Deconstructions

87

6 Racialised relations

89

7 A woman's place

106

8 Culture and anarchy

126

<b>Part 3</b>	
<b>Re-orderings</b>	<b>145</b>
9 Social space	147
10 Someone like me	166
11 Hierarchy makes you sick	186
12 Movements in space	205
13 'Us' and 'them'	225
14 Reproducing hierarchy	246
<i>Bibliography</i>	260
<i>Index</i>	276

## Illustrations

### Figures

2.1	The different social perspectives of the social classes	25
3.1	Marx's model of base and superstructure	35
3.2	The Marxist model of class formation	37
3.3	Weber's multi-dimensional model of stratification	40
3.4	Stratification as status ranking	48
9.1	The space of social positions and lifestyles	150
10.1	Percentage of individuals from different social classes with 'service-class friends'	167

### Tables

3.1	Spheres of power: class, status and party	41
5.1	Warner's social classes	71
5.2	The Nuffield class scheme	80

## 4 Sins of the fathers

The previous chapter explored how the 'founding fathers' of sociology helped establish the study of stratification. These early writers defined stratification analysis in its modern form, and identified a number of key questions that recur in contemporary discussions. These questions are:

- How do social conditions relate to individual social actions and perceptions?
- How do differences in hierarchical position relate to the drawing of subjective boundaries?
- What range of factors influence hierarchical social behaviour (and how are we to conceptualise their inter-relationship)?
- How does hierarchical inequality relate to cultural differentiation?
- By what range of social processes is the stratification order renewed and sustained over time? And how does the stability of the stratification order relate to processes of consensus, conflict and disorder within the stratification system? (Or, the question of social reproduction.)

The classical authors' answers to these questions have had a major impact on contemporary understandings of stratification, but this influence has not been entirely benign. The solutions of the classic authors are flawed, so contemporary accounts of stratification have attempted to blend their different insights, to correct their oversights and weaknesses. However, despite their differences, the classical authors shared common fault-lines in their thinking, and so cherry-picking their ideas is no guarantee of more successful solutions. In fact, the same fault-lines and problems of the classical authors are still in evidence in the work of their successors. Indeed, these fault-lines have widened into rifts which, as we shall see, have threatened to undermine the study of stratification altogether.

A series of conceptual divisions emerge in the classic accounts. These are:

- the separation of structure from action, with a concomitant stress on the 'structural' as a material, underlying realm that influences or determines action, to a greater or lesser degree, whilst 'action' is conceived in terms of meanings, intentionality and the exercise of values;

- a corresponding division between the 'economic' (seen as an impersonal structural realm) and the 'social' (seen as the realm of evaluation and cultural difference).

Contemporary stratification analysis has been strongly shaped by these divisions, emerging as a form of structural analysis, with that structure seen as an economic realm. However, difficulties in tracing the links between 'structure' and 'action', the 'economic' and the 'social', have led to increasing criticisms of this model, amid charges of determinism and economic reductionism. Critics have turned from economic and structural accounts to focus on agency, subjective meaning and social and cultural difference, all seen as increasingly independent of economic, structural divisions. In the process, social analysis has increasingly neglected issues of stratification and inequality altogether. Indeed what were tensions *within* the work of individual authors have become distinct schools of analysis, with a separation into conventional stratification approaches focusing on the structural inequalities in life-chances, on the one hand, and on the other hand, approaches influenced by postmodernism, which focus on agency, discursive identity and cultural differentiation, unencumbered by 'materialist' concerns.

As Shilling and Mellor (2001) argue, the postmodern rejection of structural, materialist social explanation often shows an amnesia about the history of social analysis. Many of the attacks caricature the work of the classical (and more recent) theorists, and ignore their efforts to battle the very problems raised by the critics. In the face of the limitations of structural and materialist models, postmodern approaches have retreated into an emphasis on indeterminate agency and the cultural, but this, of course, merely reproduces the same divisions which troubled the classical authors.

The rejection of stratification and the ordered nature of social life is unwarranted. This book shows that social location continues to be an important factor in the construction of cultural identities and social difference, and that economic inequalities remain as relevant as ever in shaping destinies, and in providing the materials for social and cultural differentiation. The concept of stratification remains a vital tool in understanding how individuals shape their lives. However, this does not mean that the attacks on structural, material explanation are simply mistaken. There are substantial problems, rapidly proliferating in recent times, which can be traced back to the classical authors' conception of stratification. Indeed, part of the reason that contemporary arrangements appear so 'chaotic' and 'fluid' is that we lack the conceptual tools to make sense of them. But the problem does not lie in the inherently disordered nature of social life. Rather the problem lies in the limiting ways in which the structured, 'material' nature of social life has been conceived, so that social life always appears to escape the limiting categories of theory. There are ways of conceiving stratification which are less encumbered with the problems of 'structural' accounts, and which correspond better to postmodern accounts of social experience as highly differentiated, and based around cultural and social lifestyles, whilst retaining an emphasis on inequality, and the patterned, orderly, and constraining nature of social relations.

However, before we think about possible solutions we have to understand the nature of the problem. This chapter sets this out: establishing the legacy of conceptual division (and explanatory difficulty) that the classical authors handed down to their intellectual heirs; and the fracturing of that inheritance into distinct areas of analysis, yet all troubled by the same explanatory problems.

## A fractured legacy

All three classical statements of stratification argue that the social conditions of our existence constrain our lives, affecting how we view ourselves and others. Such a statement is basic to any theory of stratification. However, the classical authors vary in how they view the link between social conditions and individual actions and perceptions. Marx, Durkheim and Parsons make the strong claim that an external social structure *generates* social behaviour. It is generally argued that these traditions overstate their case, and that their models of structure cannot fully account for variations in behaviour. Weber's position – partly a response to the failures of Marxism – is more pessimistic about the explanatory possibilities of social location since, as he notes, sometimes people act in concert with people in the same social position, but at other times they do not. For Weber, social position is a *factor* explaining people's behaviour but is not determinative.

However, all the classical sociologists acknowledge the duality of social life, as an external constraint on the individual, but also constituted from the mass of individual actions. Each of them agrees that, on the one hand, individuals are constrained in their actions by wider social forces, but that on the other hand, the source of these external constraints lies precisely in the actions of ourselves and others. That is, we all of us actively create the social world, as purposive agents, interpreting and shaping our lives. However, this recognition of the duality of social life also gives rise to a conceptual separation, a binary division between 'structure' and 'action', seen as mutually implicated concepts (with the one constituted in the other). This division is, in turn, bound up with a series of other binaries: between the 'economic' and the 'social', 'inequality' and 'difference', which have been a key feature of stratification analysis, and of sociology more widely. As Holmwood and Stewart have pointed out (1991), a series of analysts have argued that the key to understanding social life lies in the mutuality of the links between these binary divisions, stressing that social life always contains both external constraint *and* individual agency and choice, economic *and* social elements, inequality *and* difference. Explanations which favour one or other of the terms have therefore been accused of reductionism, fitting the complexity of social life within too narrow bounds. However, the history of social analysis is a graveyard of failed attempts to balance the terms of these binaries. In practice, one side or the other has become dominant.

The structure/action divide can be compared to a game of table-tennis – once you accept there are two sides to social life then you have to keep the ball going back and forth for explanations to work, but somehow, in almost all social analysis, the ball ends up stuck on one side of the net. This results in incomplete

explanations of social life. But nobody sets out to do this. Neither Marx, Durkheim nor Parsons *set out* to provide 'structural' accounts, and the problem of one-sidedness recurs in social explanations which attempt to 'correct' the limitations of the classical authors. One reason for this is because it is the *failure* of social explanations which appears to divide behaviour from its social location (Holmwood and Stewart 1991). Take the problems of accounts which are accused of determinism, that is, of making over-ambitious claims for their explanatory structural categories. Marx, for example, is accused of 'economism', placing too much importance on economic factors to explain social behaviour. However, the charge of 'determinism' is never used when social action appears to correspond to social location (when people act as the theory predicts that they will). In such cases, there seems to be no division between 'structure' and 'action'. The division only arises in those instances when people do not behave in the ways that the theory predicts (when people in the same class behave differently, for example). In such cases, social location and social behaviour appear dislocated.

There are a number of possible responses to this situation. One has been to argue that there are other influences on social behaviour (that, for example, it is not only our class that influences our actions but also our gender and ethnicity, and so on), in which case the problem is to explain the inter-relationship of these different explanatory factors. Structural categories (like 'class') appear to explain some of the variation in social behaviour, but not all of it, so the question arises why class processes sometimes appear to influence behaviour, whilst at other times gender or race and ethnicity are more decisive. This often turns into a stress on the agency of individuals, that is, stressing the 'action' side of the structure/action equation. It is commonly argued that we are always more than the product of our social location, because we have agency in how we respond to it. There are multiple influences on our behaviour, and individuals can interpret these influences in different ways (if I choose to regard my ethnic identity as more important than my gender or my class, this will affect my behaviour accordingly), just as they can decide to break the accepted rules of social behaviour. The implication is that individual behaviour can never be fully understood in terms of its social location, because the subjective meanings that individuals place on their position, and their motives and intentions, also shape their actions in unpredictable ways. This introduces an element of contingency and indeterminacy into social analysis. Some writers see the acceptance of indeterminacy as a feature of human action as rather too convenient. Indeed, Holmwood and Stewart (1991) suggest that the very notion of 'action' is in fact a residual category, and that the stress on the indeterminacy of action only emerges to help explain the messy inconsistencies of behaviour which escape the orderly categories of social explanation. They are suspicious of claims that the problem lies in the inherently 'chaotic' nature of social life rather than in explanatory deficiency.

However, structural accounts of behaviour do appear deficient, and their limitations have led, in more recent work, to a further process of division, with arguments that no reconciliation of structure and action is possible. It has been

analysts increasingly irrelevant with a widening gap between 'structure' and 'action', the 'economic' and the 'social', as structural economic explanations no longer have the force they once did. It has variously been suggested that social divisions are increasingly 'free-floating', that culture and consumption have eclipsed economic production as the key arenas of social life; that economic divisions and inequalities have diminishing consequences for the formation of cultural lifestyles; that individuals have now become 'agents of their own fate', reflexively fashioning their biographies with increasing personal choice; and that the coherence of social divisions and inequalities has been undermined as progressive individualisation has led to increasingly fragmented, chaotic, and fluid social relations. A series of influential approaches has stressed agency in social affairs, arguing for a weakening of social structural constraints and codes of behaviour.

Although there is a recognition that patterned inequalities still exist, they are seen as an increasingly less significant aspect of people's cultural identity (so that there has been a de-coupling of action from structure, of the social from the economic). Alternatively, the rise of postmodern and post-structuralist approaches have increasingly abandoned the 'grand narratives' of structural inequality altogether. So problems with 'structure' have led to a retreat into agency. People are seen as active agents, reflexively shaping their destinies. Social relations are seen as fluid, fragmented, shifting, and, above all, *discursive*, with the formation of identities regulated by ideas and meanings, rather than by material structures. This amounts to the abandonment of the very idea of stratification and inequality in favour of accounts of the discursive construction of difference.

By definition, the problem with the retreat into action is that there is no sense of structured social relations. Social life is seen as patternless, or rather such patterned social relations that do exist are presented as inherently unstable, subject to constant change and revision. Just as the collapse into structure leads to the problem of determinism, so the retreat into agency leads to the problem of *voluntarism*. Voluntarism rests on the assumption that individual choices and decisions are the decisive element in social action. However, whilst it is clear that social relations *do* emerge out of the intentional, meaningful activity of the actors involved in them, there is a danger in assuming that social relations *only* emerge on this basis. Voluntaristic approaches disregard those influences on social behaviour that go beyond the subjective awareness or intent of the actors involved. This wilfully ignores the constraints within which people must continue to live. Structured inequalities continue to set substantial limits on choice and agency for all and create situations in which some are more free to act than others.

As we shall see, postmodern and post-structural approaches have been criticised in their turn for denying issues of inequality, and for emphasising relations of difference as symbolic, discursive constructions, thereby underplaying the ways in which 'difference' emerges through practical, lived relations in material social locations. One of the things I want to argue in this book is that this constant battling between agentic and structural accounts is neither necessary nor

inevitable. There can be a reconciliation between 'difference' and 'inequality', 'action' and 'structure', the 'material' and the 'social', but we need to address problems in how the 'structural' and the 'economic' have been conceived, by both advocates and critics of such approaches.

### 'Structure' and 'action'

All the classical authors start out from the premise of duality of social life, yet all their explanations eventually collapse back on one side of the division that they make. Marx insists on both agency and constraint: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (1852/2000: 329). Marx sets out reasons why people choose to behave in the way that they do, but they still have to choose. Marx does see objective social conditions as important regardless of the consciousness of the actors who experience those conditions, because economic relations limit our lives in ways which we may not fully recognise. But his whole argument is that particular conditions will lead to recognition, as shifts in class structure (the simplification of 'class-in-itself' relations) result in the conscious realisation of 'class-for-itself'. The problem is that the failure of revolutionary class consciousness means that the conditions of inequality and social actions appear permanently disconnected in the Marxist model. Despite their communal position, Marx's proletariat failed to act in concert as a self-aware group. Whilst it is important to stress the independent and constraining effect of social location, if structural conditions never impinge as meaningful or significant on the consciousness of the actors involved, then structure and agency are disconnected.

The same apparent problem – emphasising structure at the expense of action – emerges out of the explanatory failures of the normative functionalists. Again, the initial statement is of the duality of social life, with Durkheim arguing that social structure is really only action which has become habitual and 'crystallised'. However, these solidified actions become external and constraining: 'a totality of definite rules like so many moulds with limiting boundaries, into which we pour our behaviour' (1961: 24). This seems to remove actors as thinking, purposive agents from the picture. Parsons recognises this problem and initially aims to modify Durkheim's concern with external constraints on action with Weber's 'subjective' approach (concerned with the meanings of action) (Holmwood 1996: 31). Yet Parsons is also criticised for his system-determined account of individual action, in which 'actors only perform according to scripts which have already been written out for them' (Giddens 1976: 16). Ironically, this attempt to state the *links* between structure and action ends up describing individual actors as the expression of structures.

Part of the problem with 'over-structural' accounts lies in the particular and restrictive way they conceive social structure. Marx sees the structural arena in terms of economic relations, and is often accused of neglecting the independent

effect of wider social elements on behaviour. Durkheim and Parsons provide a useful corrective in seeing the structural in social terms, of which the economic is but one component. However, they then narrowly define *social structure* as a system of institutionalised *common values*. This provides no sense of how differences in social resources affect consent to common values, nor of how the common value system might be generated by inequalities in power, status or economic resources. The structural, in both sets of accounts, is either conceived of as economic or as a value structure, and so appears 'thin' and one-sided as an explanation of social action.

The difficulty for both is in establishing a coherent relationship between 'social' and 'economic' processes. This legacy continues into the present day, as contemporary stratification theory has experienced considerable difficulty in theorising the relationship between economic and social processes in the stratification order. In all the classical accounts of stratification, the instrumental and contractual nature of economic relationships is stressed. For Marx, modernity is characterised by the rise of impersonal economic labour markets. Weber shares Marx's view of capitalism as a class-society, and stresses the market nature of class, arguing that 'the market and its processes "knows no personal distinctions"' (1948: 192). The normative functionalists also see the economic as an arena dominated by self-interested instrumental motivations, and so distinguish 'economic' from 'social' principles in much the same way. The 'social' in all these accounts, therefore, is the arena of values.

### The 'economic' and the 'social'

Following the classical sociologists, the separation of the economic from the social has been a common feature of stratification theory, usually in the form of a division between class, seen as the sphere of the impersonally economic, and status, seen as the sphere of social evaluation. 'Class focuses on the divisions which result from the brute facts of economic organisation. Status relates to more subtle distinctions which stem from the values that men set on each other's activities' (Lockwood 1958: 208).

However, it is difficult to maintain a coherent distinction between the 'economic' and the 'social', because 'status' divisions also have an economic dimension, and 'economic' processes are also structured by social evaluations. But if you can't maintain the *distinction* between the economic and the social it is even more difficult to theorise their *relationship*. These divisions 'are particular manifestations of the fact/value, structure/action distinction so characteristic of modern sociology, a false opposition, though extremely difficult to dispense with' (Stewart *et al.* 1980: 5).

In dividing the economic from the social, Marx and the normative functionalists were attempting to state the nature of their relationship in stratification processes, rather than prioritise one over the other. However, in practice, the economic has increasingly become dominant in accounts of stratification. Marx is accused of reducing complex social processes to **over-simplified economic**

factors, but he was actually attempting to unite them through the linkage of property relations. His is a '*sociological economic theory at the centre of which are the social relations entailed by the division of labour and private property*' (Craib 1997: 95). His account looks like economic 'reductionism', because his stress on property relations is too crude to link the economic and the social, ignores finer distinctions within and across property relations, and so fails to explain the subjective boundaries regarded as important by people themselves. Important divisions (such as gender or ethnicity) do not correspond well with Marx's vertical economic categories, and so these appear as a relatively independent 'social' ordering. Because the explanation fails, the social appears detached from the economic.

The normative functionalists start from the other end of the problem, arguing that self-interested 'economic' motivations are constrained and regulated *within* wider, normative, social structures. Parsons believed that self-interested 'economic rationality' was an important factor in social action, but argued that, since economic systems (and motivations) varied, they had to be explained in terms of 'other, non-economic elements' (1968 [1937]: 730). Similarly, Durkheim argued that to understand social life we must look beyond its 'material foundation' because 'the principal social phenomena, religion, ethics, law, economy, and aesthetics, are nothing else but a system of values' (quoted in Thompson 1982: 84). The difficulty is that while institutions clearly do reflect social values, they are formed by other, non-normative influences as well. Not all rewards are determined by shared evaluations of people's worth, since power and economic clout are factors too. People have varying degrees of acceptance of the stratification order, and of their own place within it, but from a normative functionalist perspective there can be no systematic explanation of why people at different levels of the stratification structure vary in their support for the ranking order, because the stratification order is itself defined as a structure of shared values. As a result, actors reflect the stratification structure, but do not reflect *upon* it. The normative functionalist account doesn't see values as deeply differentiated, so there is no systematic account of how variations in structural conditions (or the institutionalised value system) shape the actions of different groups or bring them into conflict. The problem with seeing the economic 'structure' as one based on values is that it fails to acknowledge the extent to which unequal resources create divisions of interest, and generate different and conflicting social evaluations. That is, in focusing on how the economic is shaped by social values, the normative functionalists ignore how 'brute economic facts' can shape social values.

However, it is also worth noting that whilst the normative functionalists conceive of the structural as a value system, they still see the main arena of modern stratification as being the (primarily) 'economic' realm of the labour market. They may conceive that occupational order, in value terms, is a ranking of prestige and functional importance, but it is still the occupational order which is the main determinant of social status in modern societies.

The difficulties in theorising the relationship between 'action' and 'structure', 'social' and 'economic', give rise to a third approach, that adopted by Weber,

which argues there can be no systematic statement of their relationship. Weber argues that individual actions are never fully determined by social position, because 'economic' and 'social' processes are linked but always relatively autonomous. This position simply accepts that 'action' and 'structure' can never be reconciled in social analysis, and is thus a precursor of the widening gap between agentic and structural accounts in contemporary social analysis.

Weber shares Marx's view of capitalism as a class-society, and stresses the market nature of class, but divides 'class' from 'status' in a more marked way, arguing that there can be no consistent statement of their relationship. For Weber, social behaviour cannot be 'read off' from economic location, since allegiances are affected by other, non-class, factors. Economic differences are never enough to explain social divisions – a statement of the semi-autonomous nature of the 'social' from the 'economic'. However, Weber also argues that social groups introduce closure into the market through monopolisation – representing the intrusion of status elements into economic principles. This, of course, undermines the distinction between economic and social processes, because restricting allocation to positions helps structure the rewards of those positions. This means that economic locations are partly constituted through processes of status evaluation and, therefore, that 'economic' structural arrangements are also 'social'.

However, Weber avoids the problem of specifying the links between 'economic' structure and 'social' action by retreating into 'agency'. Weber is less concerned with structural relations, and refuses to identify a social *system*, instead focusing on those social divisions that are stressed by the people concerned. Weber rejects the idea of a systematic account of the link between social location and social behaviour, seeing their relationship as contingent. For Weber, 'the existence of common qualities does not imply the existence of communal relationships between the people who share these qualities; he has no conception of people belonging to a "class-in-itself", independently of their consciousness' (Craib 1997: 122). The main thrust of his work is on subjective perceptions of division, and on self-conscious groupings. This has become the template for subsequent approaches experiencing difficulties with structural determinism. Whilst acknowledging structural relations, their importance has been reckoned in terms of whether people themselves regard such distinctions as important.

### The divided inheritors

Problems in mapping the relations between the 'economic' and the 'social' has led to the fracturing of contemporary accounts into approaches which focus on one or the other. There has been a division between those emphasising agency, and the 'social' as cultural and symbolic, and between those emphasising the structural and the economic. All sides acknowledge the importance of the relationship between the two, but the difficulty specifying the relationship leads to omissions and accusations of determinism or voluntarism.

Most contemporary stratification analysis has adopted a mix of Marx and Weber, stressing the labour market as a realm of structural constraint, but

investigating the degree to which individual behaviour is influenced by such structures. One approach, neo-Weberian class analysis, emphasises the structural, economic, constraints on social behaviour. Here the stress is on how structural factors shape life-chances and limit opportunities. The focus is on the enduring legacy of inherited economic position, that is, on how people are limited by the structural location they are born into, over and above their individual agency or efforts. Here class occurs 'behind our backs', shaping life-chances and social behaviour in ways of which we might not fully be aware. However, it has been argued that there is a loss of agency in such accounts, and an undue prioritisation of economic relations, with social and cultural divisions seen as mere 'effects'. In their focus on patterned inequalities in life-chances such approaches have been criticised for downplaying issues of subjective identity or cultural lifestyle. In particular, it has been argued that stratification theory has ignored divisions which are not straightforwardly 'economic', such as racial, ethnic and gender divisions.

All the classical sociologists saw the separation out of the economic as a distinct (and dominant) sphere within society as one of the defining features of 'modernity'. Because of their assumption that modern life is organised around increasingly impersonal market or rationalistic criteria (Marx and Weber) or reflects the triumph of individualisation and achievement over ascription as the basis of social organisation (Durkheim and Parsons), the classical sociologists therefore saw status distinctions as peripheral in modern life. They did not ignore racial or gender divisions, but did sideline them, seeing them as the by-product of other processes (for example, the competition over economic resources). Their founding assumptions meant they shared the 'belief that racial and ethnic social bonds, divisions, and conflicts were remnants of a preindustrial order which would decline in significance in the modern period' (Omi and Winant 1994: 9). Yet, far from being an aberration or residue of the past, slavery and colonialism were *central* to the development of modern societies, and racial divisions remain an enduring basis of conflict. The 'market' also clearly differentiates on the basis of gender and other social statuses, and the persistence of gender inequality is a considerable challenge to the economic model of 'class' society and the dissolution of status constraints. In marginalising gender and race in their accounts of modernity, the classical sociologists were, at best, 'sex' and 'colour' blind and, at worst, guilty of reproducing sexist and racist categories (prioritising men over women, and 'the West' over 'the rest'). To be fair, as Shilling and Mellor note, one reason for their neglect was because they 'sought to distance sociology from the claims of evolutionary biologists' (2001: 146). But in rejecting 'biological' explanations of inequality, the classical sociologists located race and gender in the 'social' sphere (since the economic was 'impersonal'). They therefore saw race and gender as 'ideological' constructs, easily swept away by more rational evaluations. If race (and gender) are based on 'status' evaluations, they should be increasingly outmoded in societies based on 'class' processes. However, 'status' divisions have not disappeared, so it is the 'economic' model of stratification which has begun to look outmoded.

Weber's emphasis on status divisions does allow more space for the discussion of race and gender, but his account is narrowly focused on their symbolic aspects.

Weber is moving away from a position that privileges economic relationships. However, his account of gender and ethnicity as aspects of status did not carry this insight far enough. Gender, ethnic and age divisions reflect more than differential social evaluation, also encompassing divisions of labour and differential material resources. Status does not seem a robust enough concept to encompass all of these.

(Bradley 1996: 54)

This division (locating class in the 'economic' and race and gender in the 'social') has continued to the present day:

class is seen to be a division marked by material difference, and inequality of positioning around material resources, whether conceived in the area of production or distribution, determined by relations of exploitation or by relations to the market. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is treated as relating to being positioned in terms of culture, or in the symbolic and identificational realm, with particular behavioural or action elements flowing from this. . . . The lasting effect of these traditions of exploring social inequality, through the primacy of the economic realm have seriously skewed academic conceptions of inequalities and social stratification. They have been impediments to thinking about inequalities in a more holistic and multidimensional way, and are premised on the ontological and epistemological primacy of economic/material needs and their social organisation in human life.

(Anthias 2001: 375)

### From 'inequality' to 'difference'

It is usually pointed out that there are racial divisions within class categories, so that individuals in the same economic position but with different racial identities will have different lifestyles and life-chances. Racial (and gender) divisions cannot be 'read off' from economic divisions. This seems, at first sight, to suggest that the vertical dimension of economic stratification is complicated by a lateral 'cultural' (or 'social') dimension of racial difference. However, a straightforward division between 'inequality' (economic and hierarchical) and 'difference' (cultural and lateral) cannot be maintained. The 'social' dimension of difference is not independent of economic divisions, and racial differences are not 'free-floating' of economic inequality. Whilst racial and gender divisions clearly entail cultural and symbolic aspects, they are also bound up with material inequalities. Racial divisions are not simply 'cultural', since the construction of racial difference is bound up with systematic inequalities in access to social and material resources (that is, they are also vertical). So 'economic' and 'social' processes are

not independent of each, but they are not identical. The difficulty is in then explaining 'racial' divisions which are not straightforwardly 'economic', but cannot be understood solely in terms of cultural 'difference'.

[T]he analysis of social divisions as forms of stratification has tended to mean, traditionally at least, a focus on class relations. Despite the recognition that gender and ethnic processes entail subordination and inequality, the tendency has been to incorporate them into social analysis through the notion of 'difference', rather than through analysing them as forms of stratification without reducing them to class divisions.

(Anthias 1998: 506)

In practice, accounts of racial divisions have tended to flip back and forth between 'material' (economic) and 'cultural' explanations, with each side accusing the other of explanatory inadequacy. 'Cultural' accounts of race have been criticised for ignoring the material inequalities that run alongside racial divisions, whilst 'materialist' approaches have been accused of economic reductionism.

Accounts of gender are riven with similar difficulties. Early attempts to explain gender inequality within the categories of class failed, as it became apparent that gender divisions cross-cut class categories. However, attempts to argue that the source of gender divisions lay outside the economic, with women's inequality located in the family and domestic relations, also ran into difficulties, because of the way in which gender divisions are both domestic and labour-market relations (so 'social' and 'economic'). Again, disillusionment with the problems of theorising different structures of inequality (patriarchy and capitalism) has led to a shift in focus to the discursive construction of gender difference.

Here we can see the same uneasy cycling between structure and action, the economic and the social, which has characterised conventional stratification analysis. The latest turn of the wheel has been a rejection of the materialist, structural side of the equation altogether.

The notion of 'difference' and its significance in distinguishing 'self' from various culturally defined 'others' has dominated debates in many disciplines. In this work – loosely grouped under the heading of 'postmodern' or 'poststructuralist' – earlier notions of a stable, immutable sense of identity, typically rooted in social class position, have been disrupted. The significance of other dimensions of identity, especially gender and ethnicity, and their interconnections, has been recognised, as well as the provisional, tentative nature of identity which is theorised as an ongoing performance, variable in space and time . . . This approach to identity is sometimes termed a 'relational perspective' in which identity is theorised as a contingently defined social process, as a discursively constituted social relation, articulated through complex narratives.

(McDowell 2003: 78)



Such claims bear the mark of post-structuralist approaches which suggest 'that the ways in which humans speak about the world creates the world, yet that this speech is itself determined by discourses based on exclusions and differences', so 'that neither society nor the subject have any meaning other than that created arbitrarily within language, and that "reality" is characterised by indeterminacy, instability and the impossibility of agreed meaning' (Shilling and Mellor 2001: 188).

A range of writers, influenced by postmodern arguments, have suggested that the 'increasing social diversity and plurality' of contemporary life has led to a 'fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity' (S. Hall 1991: 44). The collective categories of 'gender', 'class' and 'race' 'cannot any longer be thought in the same homogenous form. We are as attentive to their inner differences, their inner contradictions, their segmentations and their fragmentations as we are to their already-completed homogeneity, their unity' (S. Hall 1991: 45). This is the triumph of agency over structure, and of the 'social' over the economic in social analysis. Because our social ties are so multiplex and differentiated, it is argued that subjective identity is increasingly 'free-floating'.

This rejection of any structured or material basis to identity is not limited to 'lateral' gender, or racial and ethnic differences, but now extends to the vertical divisions of class. It is argued that whilst economic inequalities still prevail, they no longer systematically relate to lifestyle differences or identity. The postmodern claim of the 'death of class' is that consumption is increasingly important for how we order our lives and define ourselves, in ways quite independent of economic divisions. Increasing affluence, and the huge array of consumption choices, mean that people at the same economic level are increasingly culturally differentiated from each other. This argument sees social relations as inchoate and shifting, in which identity is not determined in any patterned way by structural relations, but rather centres on the active construction of individualised lifestyles.

Such accounts emphasise the way in which discursive categories (ways of thinking and speaking) provide a shifting framework for our social relations, without exploring how practical and material social relations influence the formation of discursive identities. But this, of course, simply reinscribes the stress on the symbolic and cultural (rather than material) nature of racial and gender divisions. Naturally, there have been rejections of such accounts, by those who are suspicious of the abandonment of issues of inequality, and who question whether we really have that much freedom to choose who we want to be.

As we shall see, it has also been suggested that the organisation of 'difference' cannot be understood without examining its social context, that is, how differences are employed and modified in patterned social relations. This directs attention back to the role played by practical social relations in the formation of 'difference', and thus how 'difference' is bound up in 'inequality'. This will be discussed in Part 2 of this book, 'Deconstructions'.

### 'Objective' and 'subjective'

Part of the difficulty in thinking about the relationship between difference and inequality is that within conventional stratification theory there has been a tendency

to characterise *difference* as *vertical differentiation*, that is, as the result of structural economic inequality. This is apparent in the work of the classical sociologists. For Marx, social differentiation is the result of economic relations (which promote or undermine social differences, creating homogeneity or diversity). Durkheim, by contrast, conceives stratification in terms of functional differentiation, yet this differentiation is still primarily in terms of the division of labour (and so vertically, and economically, organised). For Weber, and for those influenced by post-modernism, the existence of cross-cutting, lateral, social divisions has therefore been seen as something which undermines the unity of economic 'groups'. The intersection of multiple dimensions of 'difference' is regarded as undermining structural determination, because we are subject to such a range of conflicting social influences.

The difficulty is not only that we have to consider subjective perceptions of difference that are not straightforwardly economic or 'vertical' (along lines of ethnicity, race or gender, for example); but also that there are problems explaining how and why people draw lines across economic 'vertical' differentiation. This, of course, is the problem of understanding how variations in social experience relate to perceptions of social difference.

Within 'structural' accounts, subjective perceptions of difference should map onto differences in material location, but given the highly differentiated nature of unequal relations, where exactly should the lines be drawn? Ossowski (1963) argues that there are two distinct ways of viewing stratification. The first approach sees the stratification order as an unbroken, graduated *hierarchy*, a highly differentiated ordering of people or positions, with relatively fine intervening gaps between them. The second approach sees the stratification order as *categorical*, composed of distinct groups with the same social or economic position. Here stratification is discontinuous, comprised of internally homogenous groups with clear-cut boundaries.

The second approach places more emphasis on discontinuities and gaps in structural relations as the basis of group formation and subjective identities. Marx's main emphasis is on class *groups* defined in terms of common relations to property ownership. Whilst acknowledging that there are more differentiated gradations *within* class grouping ('intermediate strata' and class fractions), Marx argues that the polarisation of classes would eliminate such gradations within and across class groups. In the absence of polarisation, however, the occupational inequalities *within* classes defined by property relations have come to seem increasingly significant. So the distinction between categorical and gradational schemes is hard to maintain because categories tend to contain hierarchical differences within them. The problem for class accounts (and indeed all categorical stratification schemes) is why the division *between* categories should be more important than the divisions *within* categories. Conventional class theory has spent a long time looking for gulfs in social experience to explain the sharp symbolic boundaries that people draw, but has always run up against the internal differentiation within categories, and the overlap across them.

Gradational approaches place much less emphasis on collective social categories, shared group identities, or any sense of rooted social divisions. This is

because although there may be discontinuities, or 'breaks', in this ladder-like hierarchy, the finely graded differences between positions means that any groupings are likely to be heterogeneous, with many differences *within* a group. This is very much the approach of normative functionalist accounts which give comparatively little emphasis to the role of subjective 'groups' or boundary-drawing, instead seeing the stratification order as a graduated hierarchy of status rankings (that is, functional differentiation without conflicting groups).

The problem is that the people who inhabit highly differentiated stratification orders often do draw sharp lines of demarcation across apparently fine hierarchical differences, establishing clear-cut boundaries. The issue, then, is how groups and hierarchies, difference and inequality, are related to each other within the stratification order.

Weber stresses the self-conscious boundaries that the members of status groups draw across what may be quite fine status and power distinctions, seeing such groups as defined by how they draw a subjective line of difference to other groups. For Weber (and Marx) solidarity *within* social groups is often reinforced by conflict *between* groups. Weber's account – based as it is on self-aware status groups, parties, and on social closure – sees the antagonistic relations between groups as the key element in processes of stratification and group formation. Weber also recognises that processes of group conflict and subordination take form in a variety of routine and everyday social activities, such as the choice of lifestyle items, place of residence, friends, or marriage partners, and allow for social subordination to occur through a *range* of competitive struggles, which often fall far short of overt conflict. Weber's account offers the possibility of seeing how processes of cultural and social differentiation might prompt, or at least help to support, processes of group demarcation. But Weber's approach tends to stop short at people's subjective perceptions of social division, ignoring those elements of stratification that go beyond the subjective awareness of actors, forces that may influence us regardless of whether we fully perceive or understand them. And there is still the difficulty of explaining why people draw the boundaries in the places they do. Weber appears to think that since boundaries are often drawn across relatively small 'objective' differences in status, power or economic resources, that such divisions are 'arbitrary'. As a result, Weber has often been accused of focusing on surface appearances, at the expense of the structural relations which help to generate them. There is no sustained account of structure, instead 'Weber offers us a pattern of groups which are always on the edge of collapsing into chaos' (Craib 1997: 129).

Chaotic fluidity, of course, is the solution that has been proposed by post-modern critics of stratification. However, this ignores the way in which differential association, and practical social relations, create an orderly, albeit highly differentiated, set of stratification arrangements. The final parts of this book argue that our experience of social life is not as fragmented, or fluid, as current conceptions of it might suggest. Each individual doubtless possesses multiple social identities, along intersecting dimensions of difference, but these arise through substantive, material (though not exclusively economic) social

relations and are frequently not experienced as contradictory or fragmented. If we can have a better understanding of how identities emerge through patterns of social interaction and in turn help to demarcate and limit interaction, then we will be in a much better position to reject the metaphor of fragmentation which dominates current analysis. This however involves more than a discursive understanding of identity, it involves the mapping of practical social relations of interaction, cultural and social dissimilarity onto an understanding of symbolic identification and demarcation.

Before we get to this, however, we have to explore in greater detail how the social divisions, and exclusions, of the classical foundations have led to problems in contemporary accounts, and the claim that social life is disorderly and fragmented.