On High and Low in Society and in Sociology

A Semantic Approach to Social Stratification

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1.

The notion of hierarchy is used both in 'naive' everyday speech and in 'scientific' sociological discourse. In sociology, it finds its most familiar expression in the concept of social stratification. Social stratification refers to social inequality, expressed in terms of high and low; it implies differentiation and vertical ranking.

The study of what is known as social stratification is a firmly established branch of sociological research and theory. Yet, the image of verticality implied in the very word stratification has seldom been the subject of systematic reflection and investigation. In most cases, the image is accepted as if it were self-evident. The opening sentence of a monograph on social mobility may serve as an example:

'Social ascent as the objectively given or subjectively experienced vertical improvement of the position of an individual or a group within the framework of a larger society can be found everywhere where, on the one hand, the differentiation of ranks, i.e. social inequality, has proceeded sufficiently and, on the other hand, insurmountable cast-like social divisions do not exist.'

(1)

While the author takes pains to indicate clearly what he means by 'social ascent', he does not stop to consider the image of verticality implied in it. Many other definitions of social stratification and vertical mobility could be quoted, in which the meaning of the high and low metaphor appears
be taken for granted. In this paper I shall take a different, 'semantic' approach. I shall view the high and low metaphor as an image that is widely used - not only in sociology - for describing and 'defining' social relationships (2). It seems worth while to reflect upon the question what is involved when sociologists borrow such an image from everyday speech and try to turn it into a scientific concept. To study the image of high and low is to study the semantic world in which we live as members and as students of society.

2.

The high-low metaphor is, of course, not restricted to social relationships. It is used in many areas, including religion (the supernatural, the supreme being, heaven), philosophy (the hierarchy of values, the sumnum bonum), and biology (higher and lower species). In psychology, there is the classical distinction between the higher faculties of the intellect and will and the lower passions, a distinction that Freud incorporated in his image of the super-ego, the ego, and the id, the psychological 'underworld' (3).

In spite of their wide range, these usages have certain points in common. Three distinct though interrelated meanings appear in each of them. What is designated as high 1) tends to be considered as better and more desirable than that which is low; 2) it seems to be invested with greater freedom and discretion (4); and 3) it is also supposed to be stronger, or, at least, to be ideally or potentially so.

The idea that the 'high' generally is at once better, freer and stronger than the 'low' can also be recognized in the social applications of the metaphor. Consider, as a sample, the following terms: top, head, chief, superior, supervisor, suppressor, lofty, eminent, elevated, exalted, upright, erect, towering, stature, crown, capital, zenith, underdog, under-graduate, underling, subordinate, subaltern, subject, subservient, submissive, lowborn, lowbred, lowbrow, lowly, humble, inferior, prostrate, supine, base,

degraded, down, bottom. This list of nouns and adjectives could be expanded with verbs such as to rule and to command which can be used with the preposition over.

In most of these instances, the 'higher' position seems to be more desirable, to allow for greater freedom and to yield more strength than the 'lower' position. The image of high and low enables people to combine these three meanings into one term.

Stanislaw Ossowski, one of the few sociologists to approach the problem of social stratification from a semantic or 'metaphorological' (5) angle, has come to a similar conclusion. According to him, the image of high and low 'is one of those images that retain their vitality over the centuries and which - so the history of differing cultures would seem to show - spontaneously impose themselves upon the imagination' (6). The metaphor seems to derive its appeal from the sense that the 'higher' is always to be desired. A high position in the social structure is accompanied by privileges that are denied to the lower strata. Ossowski distinguishes three major sets of social relationships to which the metaphor may refer: relationships between the rulers and the ruled, between the rich and the poor, and between those for whom others work and those who work (7). These three aspects of social stratification can be seen to correspond to an uneven division of strength (the rulers are stronger), desirability or value (the rich possess more desirable goods), and freedom (symbolized by the leisure of those for whom others work).

Further support for this interpretation may be found in the empirical study by Harriet Moore and Gerhard Kleining of the way a German dockworker perceives social stratification (8). According to their analysis, the dockworker sees as the main distinguishing feature of the higher strata: freedom, and of the lower strata: lack of freedom. People in the higher strata, in his view, possess the means to arrange their lives as they see fit; there are no obstacles to prevent them from fulfilling their wishes and from leading a worthwhile life. People in the lower strata, by contrast,
are a prey to forces beyond their control; they have no access to the really valuable things in life, and they cannot sufficiently command their own dark impulses (9).

We can think of several plausible reasons why the image of 'high' should cover the combined notions of social desirability, freedom and strength. Every human child grows up in a physically low position amidst adults who appear to combine tallness with these three enviable qualities. Most boys have fought physical fights in which the victor has ended up on top of the vanquished. When it comes to physical confrontations and military battles in later life, a higher position usually has strategic advantages. In some societies, the powerful and privileged still go through life literally higher than the common people: they ride on horseback or in a carriage, or they let themselves be carried.

This spatial arrangement of the privileged and the underprivileged, the superior and the inferior, has found a striking symbolic expression in some cultures. Thus, as Ossowski notes, in the Veda scriptures, a simple anatomical analogy is made: the Brahmin are said to have sprung from the lips of Brahma, the Kshatriya from his shoulders, the Vaishya from his thighs and the Shudra from his feet. 'The Shudra are said to have sprung from the deity's feet as a sign that their place is at the feet of the other three castes as their servants' (10).

In modern Western societies, the symbolism of high and low is almost synonymous with hierarchical order. In the army, the clergy, the judiciary and the civil service, the distribution of power and responsibility is officially expressed in terms of higher and lower ranks. The metaphor tends to be avoided, however, in those modern organizations such as trade unions and political parties, where an impression of equality is sought.

Such negative cases suggest that the applicability of the metaphor is limited. Other instances could be added. Radical critics of a social order usually have little need for the words high and low; they prefer to speak in more 'naked' terms of the rich and the poor or the powerful and the weak (although they rarely object to 'the oppressors' and 'the oppressed'). In general, it seems that the high-low image fits in a consensual picture of society as arranged by a well-established and widely recognized differentiation of privileges. The image looses its appeal when the conjunction of greater desirability, greater freedom and greater strength of some social positions over others is no longer taken for granted.

Thus the idea of hierarchy as expressed in the high-low metaphor contains certain assumptions; there are certain conditions to be met if it is to apply. These assumptions may be summed up as follows: 1) social positions differ in desirability, freedom and strength; 2) positions which are more desirable are also freer and stronger, and 3) this state of affairs is not likely to be altered. The transition from the 'naive' notion of high and low to the 'scientific' concept of stratification is a subtle one. But if we choose to adopt this concept as a technical term we would be well-advised to acknowledge the original assumptions implied in it. A society can then be said to be stratified to the extent that the distribution of life chances is 1) unequal, 2) coherent, and 3) stable.

This formulation preserves the meanings inherent in the image of high and low. When we speak of a stratified society or institution (e.g., army or church), we are referring to groups of people who agree that some things in life are more desirable and valuable than others, and that some people have more freedom to pursue these goods and more power to hold on to them than others. This agreement does not necessarily amount to a deeply-rooted conviction that the existing order is just. The consensus is primarily cognitive: it pertains to the common assessment of the actual superiority of some groups over others; there is a shared recognition about which groups are dominant and which norms are 'kept up' with the help of effective sanctions. Holders of different social positions
make concurrence of their mutual strength and weakness. Children are taught from an early age where they stand in the social hierarchy: the master's son learns that he is superior, the servant's daughter learns that she is inferior (11).

A high position in a stratified society or institution means that one's superiority is established and only needs symbolic proof. Estimates take place at a glance; clothing, bearing and insignia quickly reveal a person's social standing. In other words, a stratified society resembles a society with a fixed 'pecking order' (12), in which the consensus on mutual strength is so well established that it is seldom contested openly. As in a chicken run, the pecking order reduces (and, in its most extreme, 'ideal-typical' form, eliminates) random pecking and reciprocal pecking. But it does not eliminate pecking as such. On the contrary, the 'low' are by definition those who let themselves be pecked with impunity. Conservatives consider order and peace as the virtues of a stratified society; rebels 'rising up' against the prevailing order usually do so in the name of liberty and justice (13).

3.

In the preceding section I have tried to develop a coherent and consistent view of social stratification derived from the original image of high and low. As I hope to have shown, a semantic approach can help to elucidate the assumptions implicit in the 'naive' image, and to explicate systematically the meanings which have entered into the 'scientific' concept. In addition, however, a semantic analysis helps to point out further problems, some of which may defy our attempts toward systematization.

The first problem we encounter regards the ubiquity of the image. In order to test the argument outlined above it would be necessary to make a cross-cultural and historical inventory of the various social contexts in which the image is either used or not used. Next, there is the problem of explanation. What is it that makes the high-low dimension such an apposite image for a particular kind of social relation-

ships? Perhaps there is a 'pre-cultural substratum' in human social behaviour which sociologists have tended to overlook. Attempts to account for the appeal of the high-low image could lead us to a more general anthropological orientation which would include insights from such disciplines as child psychology and animal ethology (14).

In addition to these substantive problems, there are some important methodological issues at stake. Sociologists are inclined to be insufficiently alert about words. They would do well to cultivate a methodological attitude at once more respectful and more distrustful of words. Respect is necessary because words are so important in defining social relationships, and distrust is called for because the primary meanings of words are only too often vague, obscure, and self-contradictory.

For the problem at hand this means that we should take the words high and low very seriously, as indicators and, to a certain extent, co-determinants of a certain type of social order. But we should not immediately grant them the status of unambiguous sociological concepts as it is too often done in textbooks.

A greater semantic awareness such as advocated here has a direct bearing on the methods we choose for our investigations. The questionnaire method, while being the most efficient tool of social research developed so far, is a notably weak instrument for discovering the relationship between 'words' and 'deeds' (15). In the area of social stratification, this instrument has been used for constructing occupational prestige scales based upon verbal responses. We should not exclude the possibility that the hierarchies thus 'discovered' were, at least partially, generated by the published results of previous surveys. It may well be that to most of its members the pecking order of a modern society is largely opaque; publication of occupational prestige scales as scientific findings may then serve to many as a means of orientation in an otherwise poorly structured perception field and may thus have the unintended effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Obtrusive participant observation and analysis of historical and literary documents may perhaps reveal more clearly how people using the high and low image actually define social relationships. The study of social stratification seems to have been dominated too long by the theoretical debate about functional explanations of stratification on the one hand (a debate in which the meaning of the high-low metaphor has seldom been questioned), and by the accumulation of survey data about occupational prestige in various societies on the other - a much needed empirical endeavour in which, however, strict observance of technical statistical procedures has tended to obscure the substantive problem of how the prestige scales thus constructed relate to actual social conduct and social structure (16).

4.

In sociology we study the ways in which people cope with the problems of living together. Here language obviously plays an important part. With the help of words, people try to define their relationships with one another. One of the tasks of sociologists is to clarify these definitions. This paper represents an attempt in that direction: I have worked on the assumption that unraveling the high-low metaphor may bring us a bit closer to understanding the social relationships defined in those terms.

In trying to clarify verbal utterances, there is always the risk of 'clarifying' too much - of ascribing unequivocal meanings to words and statements that are inherently unclear. Possibly, I have also fallen into this trap when I sought to derive a set of consistent and coherent meanings from the words high and low and to arrive at a formal definition of social stratification in terms of a few general attributes. In any semantic analysis we have to realize that the words we analyze are part of the social situations we are trying to understand, and that the meanings of these words are as ambiguous and as flexible as these social situations themselves.

This caveat clearly applies to the conclusions I have formulated in Section 2 of this paper. A measure of ambiguity is already inherent in the very combination of desirability, freedom and strength which I have found characteristic of 'social stratification'. Since each of these three components may receive varying emphases, the concept of social stratification is far from being as one-dimensional as its spatial connotations appear to indicate. And not only do the three components vary proportionally, the very words 'desirable', 'free', and 'strong' have ambiguous and flexible meanings.

One way in which this is brought out is by the existence of 'rival images', for instance, the image of 'high' and 'deep'. In this rival image, strength, inner freedom and utmost value are ascribed to the 'deep'; the 'high', by contrast, is regarded as merely a 'superstructure' built upon the fundamentals of the 'deep' and as essentially vulnerable, vain and false. More than mere word-play is involved here; the high-deep metaphor can become the focus of a forceful social ideology as in the Marxist doctrine of economic basis and cultural superstructure. More recently, the high-deep image has given rise to the idea of the 'underground subculture' which is supposed to comprise the qualities of being more free, more vital and more authentic than the dominant surface culture.

Another important spatial image is that of 'inner' and 'outer'. People who lack the outer vestiges of power and privilege are sometimes said to possess greater 'inner' strength and freedom than those who are officially their superiors; moreover, this inner strength and freedom are held to be more valuable and desirable. This, again, is a figure of speech that corresponds to observable social realities. When a powerful ruler finds himself faced with martyrs whose life and goods are at his mercy but who refuse to give up their deviant beliefs, the ruler meets the limits of his strength. By not letting themselves be converted, the martyrs demonstrate their own unshakable strength and security (17).
The whole idea that higher positions are bestowed with a 'greater measure of freedom, strength and desirability' rests on the impression that these qualities always go together. A tendency in this direction can not be denied; but the degree to which this tendency is actually realized must remain a matter for empirical investigation. It is not difficult to think of exceptions. Thus, the old adage noblesse oblige clearly expresses the restrictions that often attend privileges. In a telling passage in The Courtier (1528), Baltazar Castiglione warns his aristocratic readers not to play with peasants at throwing the bar, wrestling, running and vaulting, unless they are 'practically sure of winning'. 'If there is anything which is too ugly and shameful for words, it is the sight of a nobleman being defeated by a peasant, especially in wrestling' (18).

Here the higher placed person is advised to restrain himself, and not to indulge in pleasures that involve social risks. If he wishes to protect his 'highness', he must avoid the chance of being put down in a wrestling game. Norbert Elias's book on court society in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries abounds with examples of how the lives of the courtiers were enveloped by severe constraints. In order to keep their high position, the aristocrats had to forego the freedom of 'letting themselves go' in many ways. Such incessant pressure of restraint may eventually lead to a sense of inauthenticity and alienation (19).

The apparent simplicity of the image of high and low hides the many inconsistencies and ambiguities inherent in the way people actually move about in their social world (20). To regard others as 'higher' or 'lower' than oneself is to accept a certain 'definition of the situation'. The reasons for doing so may vary; in many cases, they will be largely a matter of routine. As Harold Garfinkel notes, 'the more important the rule, the greater is the likelihood that knowledge is based on avoided tests' (21). It is in the very nature of pecking orders that tests tend to be avoided; this adds to the self-perpetuating character of high-low classifications, but - from a sociological point of view - it also makes them less self-evident than they seem.

Our conclusions in Section 2 would lead us to expect that a relationship which is defined in terms of high and low will show a certain structure, marked by an uneven distribution of freedom, desirability and strength. Without detracting from this general statement it must now be added that the implications of the metaphor are as varied and as flexible as the social situations to which it is made to apply. When, in a process of democratization or secularization for example, the structure of social situations gradually changes, so does the meaning of the metaphor and its threefold components. Inevitably, new connotations will accrue to the image of high and low - if it continues to be used at all.

5.

The preceding analysis is preliminary and incomplete. It may also be called interpretative or verataehend. The first qualifications are a matter of degree; no paper is ever quite finished, and the level of completion can rise with the time and effort spent on it. The second qualification is a matter of kind, however, reflecting a deliberate choice. Although this particular choice is not intended to imply that all sociology should be interpretative or verataehend, it does express the conviction that these qualities have been neglected in our field.

For several decades, the major strategy of sociologists has been to turn sociology into a 'normal science' (22). One of the means of accomplishing this was by developing formal concepts and definitions, arranging these into logically consistent theoretical schemes, and trying to derive testable propositions from these schemes. The model was attractive from the point of view of a highly formalistic philosophy of science, inspired by classical physics, but it has turned out to be severely limited in its applications, as is demonstrated by the study of social stratification.
If one reviews the literature on social stratification, one may be impressed at first by the appearance of several 'theories of stratification.' At a closer look, however, one is forced to a more sober conclusion: actually, there is no sociological theory of social stratification. There are some ingeniously arranged verbal schemes, but none of these forms a general theory of stratification that meets the required criteria of being non-tautological and empirically tested (23).

This paper is a plea to change the direction of our efforts, and, before venturing to construct general theories, to reconsider the perspective from which such phenomena as 'social stratification' may be studied. It would seem that social stratification is by its very nature not a concept that can be defined exactly and fitted into formal propositions of universal validity. It contains an image that is complex, ambiguous, and flexible; the social situations to which it refers are no less complex, ambiguous and flexible than the metaphor itself. Of course, the conclusion should not be that we just give up our efforts to study in a systematic fashion the social phenomena designated by the terms high and low. The point is that these phenomena may be approached in a different manner, and that in approaching them the term 'stratification' may be employed as no more than a 'sensitizing concept' (24), the precise meaning of which can only be filled in after close examination of each empirical case.

An interest in semantic problems is indispensable for such an approach. Such interest is not entirely new to our field. Sociologists of two distinct traditions have displayed a strong semantic awareness: those who call themselves symbolic interactionists, and those who have included the changing meaning of socially significant words into sociological-historical investigations (25). It is far from me to claim that semantic analysis is the only viable method of sociological research. Considering the limitations of other, more common approaches, however, a semantic orientation may open up much needed new prospects. At the very least, it can help to reveal the extent to which in our professional concepts we are bound to the semantic world of our own societies.

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Notes

2. Another interesting set of terms is 'good and bad', and 'good and evil'. In sociology, this set usually appears under the concept of 'values'. It should be rewarding to study the original terms in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).
4. Freedom is also suggested by the word high in psychedelic culture: to be high is to feel as free as a bird.
5. This term is used by Hermann Lübke, *Skizzenenawisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffes*, München 1965, p. 133.
7. Id., p. 23.
13. They may also invoke the high-deep metaphor. See below, p. 8.
17. See also note 21.
20. Sociologists generally try to come to grips with the complexities involved in the problem of social stratification by relying upon Max Weber's threefold distinction of power, property, and prestige. Although Weber's treatment of these terms if not free from contradictions (all three are presented as manifestations of the division of power in society, so that one concept appears both as a category and as a subcategory), his distinction is still the most useful one available. It would seem, however, that if we wish to include all possible variations in the uneven distribution of social chances, we would have to add a fourth aspect which, for want of a better term, might provisionally be named security or self-confidence.

The word self-confidence has too much of a psychological ring. What is needed is a term that brings out the social origins of an unmistakable personal quality: the courage to stand up for one's convictions, if necessary in outright defiance of the ruling authorities. There is a strong tendency for the distribution of security or self-confidence to concur with the distribution of power, property, and prestige. But self-confidence can also become the prerogative of lowly placed minorities who develop great 'inner strength and freedom'. It can become...