Introduction to Module 5

The topic for this week are the trends in social stratification in the course of sociocultural evolution and comparative patterns across types of societies. More specifically, we look at how the stratification system has evolved in human societies from the typical hunting-gathering society that was the predominant mode of subsistence 10,000 years ago to the industrial (and postindustrial?) societies of today.

We focus on the important work of Gerhard Lenski on these issues. Lenski’s first work on the evolution of stratification systems was the masterpiece *Power and Privilege* (1966, reprinted 1987), which is quite long. A curious situation for many years was that the principal alternative source for Lenski’s ideas was the undergraduate textbook *Human Societies* with Patrick Nolan (e.g., Nolan and Lenski 2004).

This semester I am no longer using these texts, although I have kept detailed questions on these readings below under Additional Questions. The readings I assigned are more recent (and shorter) works. Lenski (1994) is a historical-theoretical look at the sources of his ecological-evolutionary typology of human societies. The Lenski (2005) reading consist of two chapters from the recent book *Ecological-Evolutionary Theory*, which represents an update, summary and capstone of Lenski’s ideas on ecological-evolutionary theory.

Chapter 14 from *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond provides an interesting counterpoint to Lenski’s account, as it shows much convergence with Lenski in its lively presentation of a rather standard typology of societies emphasizing organizational aspects of society that is popular among anthropologists.

We also look at my 2004 paper showing the kind of cross-cultural comparative data from *Ethnographic Atlas* that constitute the empirical basis of ecological-evolutionary theory. The paper also brings up, somewhat implicitly, the topic of continuity in inequality processes between the rest of the animal world and human societies, a topic will pursue next week.

Synthetic Question

1. One of the most comprehensive attempts to understand the nature of stratification systems over the full range of human societies is the ecological-evolutionary theory of Gerhard Lenski. Discuss the following points.

   (a) What are the bases and the main categories of the typology of human societies that Lenski uses to explain the nature of stratification systems?
(b) What are the main social mechanisms that Lenski evokes to explain the nature of the stratification systems in relation to the type of society?
(c) What predictions does Lenski make regarding the evolution of social inequality in the course of socio-cultural evolution, and how successful have these predictions been?

Detailed Questions

Lenski (1994) - Social Taxonomies

1. How does Lenski make a case for a taxonomy of societies based on level of technology and nature of the environment, as contrasted with taxonomies based on other principles?

Lenski (2005) – Ecological-Evolutionary Theory

1. What is the surplus, and what role does it play in explaining trends in the nature of stratification systems in the course of sociocultural evolution? How is the surplus affected by subsistence technology?
2. In what ways are the conceptual pairs specific evolution versus general evolution (Sahlins and Service 1960) and intrasocietal selection versus intersocietal selection (Lenski 2005) related? In what ways are they different?
3. What is the importance from the point of view of ecological-evolutionary history of the pattern – often repeated in history – of conquest of a sedentary agrarian society by a militarily superior herding society, followed by adoption of the argarian lifestyle by the conqueror?
4. What are some of the consequences of the industrial revolution for the social inequality, including the condition of women?

Diamond (1997) – Guns, Germs and Steel

1. Compare the perspectives of Lenski and Diamond in comparing different types of societies. In which ways are the perspectives similar? In what ways are they different?


1. For some aspects of social inequality, I (Nielsen) find a pattern of agrarian reversal (increasing inequality up to horticultural societies, followed by a decline in inequality in agrarian societies) instead of the monotonic pattern of increasing inequality from hunting and gathering societies to agrarian societies that Lenski postulated. What is the significance of this finding?
2. Many dimensions of inequality have long been recognized by social scientists (e.g., power, occupational prestige, income, education, etc.). In this paper, following Laura Betzig, I propose that inequality in the “distribution” of women among men (due to various forms of polygyny) represents a dimension of inequality that has not been sufficiently recognized. What is the importance of this dimension of inequality in establishing a link between inequality in human societies and inequality in the rest of the animal world? To whom (which sex / gender) does an unequal “distribution” of women among men matter most? Why?
Additional Questions


1. What is the key factor affecting the degree of inequality in a society, according to Lenski? (Note: One can answer this at several levels.)

2. What role do Lenski’s “constants” (assumptions about human nature and society) play in the general theory? Are these assumptions necessary?

3. What is Lenski’s definition of “class”? Does Lenski’s idea of competing class systems add to our understanding of inequality? How does this compare with Weber?

4. What relationship does Lenski establish between “status inconsistency” and the leadership of revolutionary movements? In what ways does this view relate to the intellectual tradition of elite theorists, such as Pereto and Mosca?

5. What role does social mobility play in Lenski’s theory?

6. How does Lenski describe the evolution of social inequality with technological development? To the extent that types of societies can be placed along an evolutionary sequence corresponding to increasing levels of technological knowledge, what does the main trend of social inequality look like over the course of this evolutionary sequence? In what sense does the reversal of the historical trend of greater inequality with higher levels of technology that took place in mature industrial societies constitute a “paradox” relative to Lenski’s general argument?

7. What are the causes given by Lenski for the inequality decline in industrial societies?

8. What role does the notion of a “ruling class” play in Lenski’s analysis of industrial societies?

9. If one had to decide which of the stratification theorists discussed so far (such as Marx, Weber, Davis & Moore, the elite theorists) has/have the greatest affinity with Lenski’s approach, who would that be?

10. How satisfying is Lenski’s synthesis of conflict and consensus approaches?

11. Overall, what are the benefits (and costs) of taking a broad comparative approach such as Lenski’s?

_Lenski & Nolan (1991) – Human Societies_

(Note: I included this reading as additional reference – even though the focus is not specifically on social stratification – because it represents a more developed and perhaps more refined version of Lenski’s ecological-evolutionary theory, an earlier version of which is presented in _Power and Privilege_.)

1. What are the two principal dimensions of Lenski and Nolan’s typology of human societies? (Hint: the typology is summarized in the term “ecological-evolutionary”.)

2. What are the two categories of mechanisms at work in the process of sociocultural evolution, according to Lenski and Nolan?)