28 February 2003

DOCTORAL EXAMINATION IN SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Spring 2003

Answer a total of 4 questions among the following 6. If you have any question during the exam you may contact François Nielsen at francois_nielsen@unc.edu.

1. Some sociologists argue that quantitative and qualitative approaches make distinct contributions to the field of social stratification. Using at least two qualitative studies that focus on one particular kind of stratification (e.g., gender inequality or class inequality or racial / ethnic inequality) and two quantitative studies that focus on the same kind of stratification, argue for or against the idea of “distinct contributions”.

2. One of the principal areas of social stratification is the study of intergenerational social mobility. Citing the relevant literature, discuss the following issues.
   a. How do sociologists study intergenerational social mobility?
   b. What are the principle methodological difficulties in studying social mobility, and how have sociologists attempted to solve them?
   c. What are the main substantive findings in this literature? What can we say about the degree of social mobility in the United States compared to other countries?

3. 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?

4. British sociologist Michael Young coined the term "meritocracy" in his 1958 classic, The Rise of the Meritocracy, to depict a society where success and upward social mobility were determined entirely by merit, rather than by social background, race, or gender. Subsequently, the term has found widespread usage in the United States, where it seems to support to the American belief that non-egalitarianism can be justified as long as equal opportunity exists. Citing the relevant literature, discuss the following issues.
   a. Methodologically, how could one determine the degree to which a given country is a meritocracy? What information would one need to know?
   b. Based on what you have read, do you think America is a meritocracy?
c. Would a true meritocracy be socially and politically stable? Would it be a "good" society to live in?

5. Despite almost four decades of government efforts to promote racial and ethnic equality in the U.S., considerable inequalities in educational achievement, occupational achievement, and economic outcomes among racial and ethnic groups remain. Evaluate the success of sociological research (and the social sciences in general) in explaining these persistent inequalities. Do this by
   a. Identifying the different kinds of explanations that have been proposed for these persistent inequalities
   b. Evaluating the overall empirical support for these explanations

6. Compare and contrast the class theories of Marx and Weber as well as at least one Marxist approach (such as Erik Olin Wright’s) and at least one neo-Weberian approach (such as the approach adopted by Blau & Duncan in The American Occupational Structure). What approach / theory, or combination of approaches, seems most appropriate to describe the reality of stratification in contemporary U.S. society?