

On a Generalized Mechanics of Class and Revolution

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ABSTRACT

A general hierarchical five-level model of socio-economic class and class relations is presented. The model is applied to business organizations, agrarian societies, and capitalist societies. An explanation of class conflict and revolution is provided in the terms of the five-level model.

FIVE LEVEL MODEL

When constructing a hierarchical model of a society or other human organization, the number of levels used to divide the society is to a certain degree arbitrary: similar to a color spectrum, there are no exact lines of demarcation, and yet one position on the spectrum can be distinguished from another. The choice of number of classes then depends on to the degree of complexity desired for a particular model. For the model presented in this paper, society is divided into five levels:

1. Upper 上
2. Upper Middle 中之上
3. Middle 中
4. Lower Middle 中之下
5. Lower 下

In this model, the middle three levels compose the vast majority of what is considered society: most functions considered as the running of society are transactions that occur within and between these three classes. The upper class and lower class are largely invisible in day-to-day societal affairs, the upper due to their small size and their extreme wealth and power, and the lower class due to its status as the delinquent or criminal class banished from society at large.

Mapping to Business Organizations

At time of writing, present society is mostly based on capitalist business organizations. Consequently, an effective primer to understanding the relationships between the five levels is to map them to a large corporate business organization, specifically, to draw a mapping between the five-level model and the three-level MacLeod Hierarchy as detailed Venkatesh Rao's Gervais Principle. The mapping assigns the middle three levels of the five-level model to the three levels of the business organization, and the upper and lower levels to individuals related to but not strictly a part of the business:

1. Absentee business owners
2. Executives
3. Middle Managers
4. Individual Contributors
5. Fired

This serves to illustrate that the middle three levels of the five-level model form the actual core of the organization,¹ while the highest and lowest level are mostly unseen. The upper level enjoys the dividends of ownership while delegating the actual day-to-day running of the business to the executives. The lower fired level consists of employees expelled from the business for one reason or another.

Mapping to Agrarian Societies

Following the agricultural revolution but prior to the industrial revolution, most societies were structured around control of land, employing the land through farming and defending the land through military service. Due to the similarities in broad needs and methods of agrarian societies, many different agrarian cultures developed similarities in social structures, which can be approximately mapped to one another using the generalized five levels.

For example, the feudal manorial societies of Medieval Europe may be modeled as:

1. Royalty and higher nobility
2. Gentry, that is lower nobility, barons, knights
3. Medieval bourgeois, that is craftsmen, merchants, bankers, independent farmers
4. Peasants, serfs
5. Criminals

Prior to medieval age Europe, ancient Roman society can be approximately modeled as:

1. Senatorial
2. Equestrian
3. Plebians
4. Slaves
5. Criminals

Meanwhile, the five-level model can also be approximately mapped to the traditional Varna classes of Hindu society, with addition of a lower level 5 class:

1. Brahmin, that is scholarly and priestly leadership
2. Kshatriya, that is warriors and administrators
3. Vaishya, that is farmers and merchants
4. Shudra, that is laborers and workers
5. Outcastes, or untouchables

An approximate mapping may also be used to model the four occupations (shì, gōng, shāng, nóng) defined in the early Chinese social theory, with additions of an upper level 1 and a lower level 5 class:

¹ Due to potential confusion over the terminology, this paper uses the more formal business terms “executive,” “middle manager,” and “individual contributor” in place of the original jargon in Rao’s Gervais model.

1. Jūn 君, that is monarchs and lords
2. Shì 士, that is servicemen, scholars, warriors
3. Gōng 工 and Shāng 商, that is craftsmen and merchants, respectively
4. Nóng 農, that is farmers
5. Jiàn 賤, that is the delinquents

Note that although the mapping is imperfect, broad similarities can be seen in how the different levels of society interacted within themselves and with one another.

Mapping to Capitalist Societies and Marxian Social Theories

Following the industrial revolution, the source of wealth and power moved away from land and toward productivity. The result was that a large portion of the formerly middle level of craftsmen and merchants were able to gain sufficient wealth and power to rise to higher levels, hence the evolution of the term of “Bourgeoise” from the Medieval middle-class occupants of boroughs to refer to the newly powerful and wealthy class of owners of the means of production.

Early forms of Marxian theory, in modeling the resulting social changes, did not fully appreciate the continuities between agrarian and capitalist societies. As a famed example, early Marxian theory made a strong distinction between the emerging “proletariat” class and the former “peasant” class and was dismissive of the possibility of mobilizing the peasantry for revolution. Later Leninist and Maoist refinements of Marxian theory better appreciated the continuities between agrarian and capitalist societies and indeed successfully mobilized the peasantry. The continuities can be readily illustrated by a five-level mapping of a Marxian-style capitalist society:

1. Haute bourgeoisie, “upper class”
2. Moyenne bourgeoisie, “upper middle class,” “gold-collar” workers
3. Petite bourgeoisie, “middle class,” “white-collar” workers
4. Proletariat, “lower middle class,” “blue-collar” and “pink-collar” workers
5. Lumpenproletariat, “lower class”

In this model, the societal changes after the industrial revolution involve the creation of new types of roles within the same social levels, rather than the creation of new social classes. Peasantry and proletariat are both treated as members of level four, large industrialists and large landowners are both treated as members of level one, rather than as separate classes.

The level 1 upper class controls the vast majority of the wealth and influence of society, but is often unseen in day-to-day affairs, similar to how majority stake owners of a large business corporation may be almost entirely unknown, with all the attention instead given to the much more visible business executives, to whom the real owners delegate management of day-to-day problems. A key consequence of this is that many upper-class members are “out of touch” with respect to society as a whole, insulated from societal problems by protective bubbles of wealth. The alienation works both ways: in agrarian and feudal societies, it was for kings to easily walk around unrecognized by simply wearing ordinary clothes. Augustus Caesar reportedly walked around Rome unrecognized to quietly observe the people. Therefore, many individuals believed to be the leaders of society are in fact not members of the upper class, but the agents that they have delegated the day-to-day operations, selected from the next class.

Level 2 upper-middle class members occupy positions of leadership, whether in a business or in society as a whole. In the modern capitalist business world, they are the executives who run the large

corporations, but at the beckoning of the true owners. In manorial and feudal ages, they were the local barons, the actual face of power to most people in day-to-day affairs, the face of the king merely a decoration on a coin.

The level 3 middle class are the true believers of society. In Rao's Gervais model of corporations, the middle managers are described as "Clueless" due to their lack of knowledge of political power dynamics, which lead them to believe in the official ideals and narratives as presented by their corporations. Similarly, the middle class obediently swallows everything poured into them by academia and mass media (run by upper-middle class members at the behest of upper-class members), and dutifully regurgitates it upon command. In a sense, just as the caricature of the obnoxious middle manager is considered the very heart and soul of the business corporation, the caricature of the middle class is in turn the very heart and soul of modern capitalist society.

The level 4 lower-middle class maps to the proletariat of Marxian theory. Members of the lower middle class are the unskilled workers who have no choice but to sell themselves as labor, to serve at the whims of the upper and upper-middle classes and suffer abuses by self-important members of the middle class.

The level 5 underclass is the delinquent class, mapping to the lumpenproletariat of Marxian theory. In general, the lower class is invisible to most of society as it does not actively participate within society.

Conflicts

The dynamics of class interactions within the five-level model can be understood as starting from two simple premises:

1. Individuals of one level will aspire to reach higher levels and fear falling to lower levels.
2. The feelings of aspiration and of fear are felt most strongly directed toward adjacent levels.

As the desire to rise upward and the fear of falling downward are the sources of class conflict and most strongly felt in interactions with classes immediately adjacent to one another, the classes of the odd numbered levels (1, 3) and even numbered levels (2, 4) will tend to show relatively reduced hostility toward one another and relatively greater hostility toward the other classes. Each class feels threatened by the class immediately below it as a potential usurper and as a grim reminder of downward mobility, while feeling more sympathy to the off-by-one class as a potential ally against the adjacent class.

Another consequence of the relative positions is that the odd numbered levels (1, 3, 5) are far more insulated from social power dynamics than the even (2, 4). The actual running of society is largely performed by individuals of the even levels (2, 4), the upper-middle level 2 class due to the delegation of managing day-to-day operations, and the lower-middle level 4 class due to actually performing the labor. Levels 1 and 5 are insulated from the day-to-day affairs of society by their respective wealth and poverty, while level 3 fully believes in the constructed illusions of society crafted by level 2 and built by level 4. As a result, individuals of both level 2 and 4 tend toward having strong feelings of somehow being on the bottom and suffering for the sake of the other levels.

This tendency toward aligned interests is the connection to Rao's theory of the Gervais Principle of business organizations: the business executives are willing to groom enlightened individual contributors to become their lieutenants and future executives in the ongoing power struggles between executives and against middle managers.

REVOLUTION

In the five-level model, a social revolution is defined as a large restructuring of society that creates new roles and abolishes old roles or moves roles between levels. As a result, fortunate individuals are able to rise up to higher levels, less fortunate individuals fall downward to lower levels, and individuals who remain at the same level are forced to transition to different identities and roles. This restructuring occurs due to physical and technological changes that create new roles while making the old roles obsolete.

Following the technological changes of the industrial revolution, the relative value and power of land was reduced in favor of production. This meant that individuals of lower levels were no longer prevented by lack of land ownership to find ways to amass wealth and power to challenge the upper levels, if they were able to successfully adapt to the changes and obtain means of production. Individuals of higher levels meanwhile could either adapt to the change, moving their holdings away from land and toward factories, or otherwise attempt to resist the growing influence of the upstarts. Those who resisted were destroyed by the social revolutions and the end of feudalism, but those that did not kept their wealth and power: the gentry gave up their land to move into the factory management offices, gave up their titles of nobility in exchange for degrees from elite universities, and gave up their swords and military services to pick up pens and staff the bureaucratic machines.

To be sure, there were indeed former level 3 merchants and craftsmen and bankers and level 4 peasants who were able to gain sufficient means of production to rise up to level 1 owners of business conglomerates or level 2 doctors, lawyers, university professors, and business executives, but there were also many level 1 kings and lords and level 2 barons and knights who predicted the destruction of their less perceptive peers and exchanged their crowns and fief grants for stock portfolios and academic degrees. The majority of level 4 peasants, rather than advancing to higher levels, instead remained in level 4, liberated from serfdom only to become the proletariat.

Non-Revolutionary Parties

Before and after the major social revolutions, society is in an equilibrium state where individuals tend to associate only within those of their same level class. Therefore, further divisions into factions within one class are based on other differences, leading to common “left vs right” distinctions in political opinions and thus, a “Left” political party and “Right” political party. In non-revolutionary times, the struggle between the Left Party and the Right Party dominates discourse.

Of course, breakdowns within the levels into the parties are not uniform, so that when forming these parties, there are appeals to class sympathies, but in a deceptive way. The level 1 and 2 members of the Left party mobilize the Left party members of levels 4 and 5 by reminding them of their class grievances against the upper class, but then set them against level 3 and 4 members of the Right party by portraying them as the “upper class.” In the non-revolutionary state, when stakes are still low, everything in politics is about the allegiance to the Left vs Right Party. Appeals to class conflicts are merely rhetoric for the sake tapping into class feelings to strengthen non-revolutionary party resolve. No actual resolution of class conflicts is provided.

Revolutionary Parties

When the stakes are sufficiently high, members of one level of one party will always side with others of the same level but opposing party over those of the same party and different level. To do otherwise would

be to allow real mobility between the levels (that is to allow Revolution) which would be an unacceptable risk of downward mobility.

The deception of masking class conflict with Left-Right Party conflict, however, cannot continue when technological and material changes force constant raising of real stakes. Whenever technological advances create new and alternative means to amass real wealth and power, lower class individuals will use them and then demand recognition from the established upper classes to solidify their rise to a higher level. At first, they will seek to use the non-revolutionary methods of appealing to their supposed allies of higher level but same party, and some fortunate individuals do occasionally advance, but whenever there are too many candidates and the stakes are too high, they will be betrayed. When the lower-level members of both the Left and Right Party begin to realize that the upper-level members will always betray them to the other Party, they too will develop class consciousness and begin to talk with one another. The intraclass divisions of Left vs Right begin to disappear in favor of interclass divisions of Upper vs Lower, and individuals begin to move away from non-revolutionary Left and Right Parties toward forming new Revolutionary Parties.

The Transition from Non-Revolutionary Conflict to Revolution

Returning to the definition of a social revolution as a major restructuring of society involving large changes in the mapping of the five levels to different groups in society, most examples of unrest and class conflict, even those often called “revolutions” in other social theories and in historiography, are not full social revolutions in the five-level model.

As an example, agrarian societies might see sufficient cohesion and class consciousness within a group of level 2 lords to band together and overthrow their level 1 king. Many large-scale civil wars and the downfall of empires recorded in the historiography are ultimately of this type of class conflict. Though major events and worthy of study in their own right, these are not considered full social revolutions in the five-level model. In these conflicts, a victorious level 2 lord becomes a level 1 king and then promotes some of his level 3 and level 4 supporters to staff the level 2 and 3 positions of his new kingdom, meaning that the result is only the movement of individuals between level without any creation and abolition of new societal roles.

Another example in agrarian societies is the rebellion of level 4 against 2 in the form of peasant revolts against incompetent or oppressive landlords. These often did not become full revolutions because such unrest tended to be local, focused on one particular level 2 baron, and indeed historical peasant rebellions often ended with the peasants installing one of their own as a new baron and sending a petition to the level 1 king for formal recognition, which sometimes could be accepted but more often led to the king and a coalition of level 2 barons crushing the upstarts, lest other peasants in other locations take inspiration. In capitalist societies, the equivalent rebellions were seen in the form of workers striking against mismanagement or against fears of replacement, similarly involving appeals to level 1 owners or government, which were sometimes accepted as collective bargaining, but more often simply crushed.

In capitalist societies, these conflicts can be understood as the aforementioned Left vs Right Party conflicts. A level 2 Right party member may recruit and rally level 3 and 4 supporters to seize a level 1 position from a Left Party rival, but only a privileged few of his personal followers can receive promotions, while the majority of the lower-class followers are abandoned. A band of level 4 individuals might join the Left Party to rebel and overthrow a Right Party level 2 local leader, but when they call upon level 1 and 2 Left Party leaders for aid, they are betrayed out of fear of other lower-level groups taking inspiration.

This is why the communist revolutions of early Marxian theories failed to materialize: in order for a class conflict to transition to a revolution, more levels of society must become involved. Early forms of Marxian theory focused on a broad Bourgeoisie-Proletariat divide, and it would take later Leninist and Maoist refinements to realize that sub-groups within the Bourgeoisie must also be mobilized to reach sufficient cohesion and strength to achieve a full social revolution.

The beginnings of a potential full social revolution form when members of level 2 and 4 reach an understanding on shared objectives and ally to air their grievances against levels 1 and 3. Members of levels 1 and 3 both tend to resist a full revolution, level 1 due to having the most to lose in a revolution, and level 3 due to its members being the most devoted believers in the effectiveness of the social system. Meanwhile, it is the members of level 2 and 4, as those that handle the day-to-day running of society, that are best positioned to see any and all growing problems within a social system destabilized by material and technological change. If members of level 2 and level 4 band together, the stage is set for a potential social revolution, though there is still a possibility of resolution: ambitious members of the level 2 and level 4 rebellions can occasionally be bought off with level 1 and level 3 positions.

The key turning point, when unrest becomes social revolution, is when enough of the level 3 middle class finally loses faith in the system. When the true believers become the true disbelievers and throw their support behind level 2 and level 4, the revolution begins.

PREDICTIONS

In order for a theory to be useful, it must be applicable. It must not only provide enough structure to understand past events, it must also be able to make predictions of the future.

Following the industrial revolution, the next large technological revolution was the information and computer revolution, and just as the industrial revolution was followed by social revolutions from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, there will be major social revolutions following the rise of computing and software in the twenty-first to twenty-third centuries. Already there have been examples of level 2 vs level 1 usurpations in the form of market disruptions by massive technology corporations, and of level 4 vs level 2 peasant revolts in the form of rebellion against worker roles being abolished by technological advancement and against deployment of a technological advances in increasing the oppression and exploitation of workers.

Figures will appear among the level 2 workers who will not be satisfied with the ineffectiveness of Left vs Right Party rhetoric. They will sympathize with the plight of level 4 workers of both Left and Right Parties, understanding that the establishment hatred of level 4 is directed toward level 2 as well. There will not be enough level 1 positions to buy them all off, nor will power be able to be given out fast enough to implement all their demands for change. They will form Revolutionary Parties and recruit the angry and dispossessed level 4 workers who have realized that the other higher level Left and Right Party leaders have betrayed and will continue to betray them, and eventually recruit the disillusioned level 3 workers who realize that the old-world order is incompatible with the new technology. Just as the revolutions of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries were led by the relatively new upstart level 2 roles of physicians and lawyers and businessmen, the revolutions of the twenty-first to twenty-third centuries will be led by relatively new upstart level 2 roles of engineers and technology workers.

Calculations on the timeframe of these developments and when social revolutions will occur require additional refinements to the five-level theory, and will be addressed in a future paper.