

# Status Incongruence in Advanced Societies

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*The concept of Status Incongruence is becoming more and more important in Europe and the United States at a time when the old concept of social class is declining. Today, discrepancies in social status are more relevant in explaining political life than concept of social class. The article proposes a critical assessment of the concept of Status Incongruence in advanced society and an analysis of its configurations.*

The phenomenon sociologists call “status incongruence” has equivalents in the common parlance of many languages. Expressions such as *nouveau riche*, *déclassé*, *roturier* and *parvenu*, show that people in many societies perceive the incongruence between various statuses. The popular dictum «the heart on the left, the pocket on the right» expresses this incongruence between positions and feelings.

As a sociological concept, status incongruence is relatively recent. It was devised some time after the adoption of the notion of “status” following the discovery of Max Weber’s writings on this subject by some American sociologists in the late 1930s. In the 1950’s, some twelve articles were published on “status inconsistency”, most of them in the *American Sociological Review*. Those articles had a cumulative effect. At a certain point in the 1960s, it was felt that the debate on this topic had become saturated. In the absence of more empirical evidence, the theoretical discussion on status incongruence stagnated, but in the meantime the concept had been diffused in textbooks and compendiums.

After a period of neglect, the concept of status inconsistency has been reinvigorated over the last two decades as sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic have acknowledged a “decline of social classes”. However despite the fact that the idea of social class has been dethroned, social inequalities persist.

The concept of status incongruence is a companion of the theory of cross-pressure. The first article focusing directly on status incongruence appeared in the same year (1944) as *The People’s Choice* by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and McPhee. The two notions nevertheless remain distinct in the sociological literature because they respond to different analytic needs.

The incidence of status incongruence increases in times of social upheaval, such as the period of the Weimar Republic, the economic depression in the USA in the early 1930's, and that in Russia after the implosion of the Soviet regime. In the two decades prior to the French Revolution of 1789, the incidence of status incongruence was particularly high.

In emphasizing the revolutionary potential of downward mobility – which he called the «proletarianization of middle classes» – Marx paid little attention to upward mobility and to the effects of status incongruence. That neglect has been considered by some scholars to be one of his more glaring errors (Lopreato and Hazelrigg 1972: 445). In contemporary sociological literature, the notion of status incongruence is related to role theory, rational theory, the theory of relative deprivation, and the theory of social movements.

This analysis considers only advanced Western societies, partly because the empirical evidence on status incongruence is available primarily for those countries, and partly because social mobility and its impact on status incongruence are a less widespread phenomenon in developing countries.

### *Status Inconsistency as a Correction of Weak Correlations*

For a longtime in sociological research, correlations between levels of social stratifications and other variables were rarely as significant as expected in the light of the hypotheses and theoretical frameworks that had been adopted. Even when the rudimentary dichotomy of manual and non-manual was abandoned and more categories were taken into consideration, the empirical results did not provide satisfactory explanations. Even when “class” as a rigid and restricted concept was largely replaced by the dimension of occupational-status, the research strategy was not improved. Certainly, the emphasis on status groups is one of Weber and Pareto's chief corrections of Marx's theory (Lopreato and Hazelrigg 1972: 83). Nevertheless, an essential approach was still missing until the 1950s, that of status inconsistency, which marked an advance in sociological thinking. It has been demonstrated that the consistency or inconsistency of a person's status based on various criteria is a better predictor of social behavior than is the level of status based on a single criterion.

### *From Social Class to Status Inconsistency*

Status incongruence is generated by gaps in income, occupation, education, and ethnic origin, and other inconsistencies between a person's social position in one domain and that person's relatively lower status in an other dimension.

Status incongruence can be found in census results by cross-tabulating indicators such as education, income, professional hierarchical position, qualification, and racial origin. There is a logical relationship between the spread of status incongruencies and the weakening of social class consciousness.

Status inconsistency has become an essential aspect of social stratification in contemporary postindustrial society. It has been exacerbated by the growth of the middle classes, and the decline of the peasantry and the industrial working class. Vertical mobility is the main source of status discrepancy. Most studies of social mobility have focused on upward mobility, particularly during the post-war period of economic development, but in more recent times downward mobility has become equally important. Today, social mobility consists mostly in what, Lipset and Zetterberg (1956: 565) called four decades ago «the interchange of ranks»: For every upward move, there must be a downward move. What was then only a hypothesis has been confirmed empirically: «Some proportion of the children of the middle class fall in socio-economic status; some do not have the abilities to complete higher education or to get along in a bureaucratic hierarchy, and fall by the wayside. Whatever the reason that some persons of middle class origin move downward, they leave room for others of lower-class background to rise» (*Ivi*: 570). Today, millions of Europeans and Americans born into the middle classes are in such incongruent situations. The downward move can be intragenerational or intergenerational.

Another source of status incongruence is liberation from primary social groups, particularly religious communities and families ties. More and more, through schooling, individual achievement negates the constraints of family background. For this reason, status inconsistency is a fertile ground for individualistic tendencies.

The concept of status inconsistency raises the concept of status crystallization which was proposed by Gerhard E. Lenski (1954) as a non-vertical dimension of social status. Strong or weak status crystallization refers to the degree of incongruence or coherence of a person's ranking according to various criteria. A strong status crystallization implies that a person is rated consistently on all important criteria, whether the rating is high or low. Today, a large part of the population in Western societies finds itself in a situation of weak status crystallization. Solid social class can exist only if the majority of the population experiences strong status crystallization.

One of the most visible varieties of status incongruence occurs among schoolteachers, who are more numerous today than were workers in the heavy industry plants four decades ago. For many teachers there is a serious gap between the level of their education and their role in society, and their income level. The left-wing orientation of the most teachers in many European

countries can be better explained in terms of status incongruence, rather than in terms of class. Even some college professors experience this incongruence.

If one compares status incongruence today and in the past, two new, important categories have become prominent over the last two decades: the ‘intellectual proletarian’ and the “ethnic achiever” (as opposed to the “skidder”).

The spread of education in most advanced societies has highlighted the need of post-industrial economy for highly educated people. Today, two thirds of people aged 18 are still in school. At the end of their college years, most of them do not find a job that corresponds to their expectations in terms of intellectual and economic rewards. It is in this category of the population – young educated people “with diplomas in their pocket” – that the rate of unemployment is the highest in most West European countries. This overabundance of graduates results from the incapacity of our technological society to absorb them in “interesting” occupations, with the existing jobs being protected by unions. This imbalance between the level of education, the quality of the job, and the amount of income generates status incongruences for “over-educated” young people. An advanced, post-industrial society in search of productivity replaces people with machines, producing a new kind of educated proletariat, that was born into the middle class. In Western Europe in the decade 1993-2003, one of every four or five young people under age 25 was unemployed, and others were pushed down into “degraded” jobs. Those who accept jobs beneath their abilities, a “degraded jobs”, represent one of the most frequent varieties of status incongruence, a “reserve army” of alienated people.

The “ethnic achiever” is a new variety in Western Europe and an old one in the United States. Frequent cases of status inconsistency can be found among ethnic and racial minorities in Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria. Immigrants of European origin within Europe are integrated and assimilated in a single generation, with the best example being the eight million French citizens of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish or Armenian origins. The sons of these European immigrants are not normally in a position of status inconsistency. When language is combined with ethnicity and religion, as with immigrants from the southern rim of the Mediterranean, the integration process takes two generations, and the younger generation often experiences status incongruence. When skin color is added, the difficulties of integration are compounded. Many immigrants from Southern Asia or Africa feel excluded from the host society. Nevertheless, a substantial minority are economically well integrated, and many climb on the income ladder. They are “ethnic achievers”, more than completely assimilated immigrants. They are deeply rooted in status incongruences.

In Europe, these two varieties of status incongruence contrast with a social category of status crystallization at the bottom of society. According to a

survey by the OECD, almost one fourth of the adult population in Western advanced societies was in the 1990s functionally semi-illiterate, and co-exists with a high proportion of functionally overeducated younger adults. Strong status crystallization arises from the fact that these semi-illiterates are also those who receive the lowest salaries, and perform the most menial work, and the large majority of them are of non-European origin. The status crystallization that occurs in Europe has a similar and more deeply ingrained counterpart in the United States.

### *Minority Status and Status Incongruence*

In many studies of electoral behavior (which are preferred because of the availability of statistics), particularly those conducted by means of survey research, the issue of social context has been neglected. Only the characteristics of individuals are taken into consideration, while the parameters of the social milieu are ignored. With some notable exceptions, too many sociologists have forgotten that the behavior of people is conditioned by their social context. This mistake has been denounced by the German sociologist Erwin Scheuch (1969) as the “individualistic fallacy”, a complement to the “ecological fallacy”. The direct consequence of ‘individualistic research’ is the dismissal of the notion of “minority”, in spite of the fact that its importance has been demonstrated repeatedly. Examples are found in the contrasting behaviors of the same “unidimensional category”, whether they are a frustrated minority or a dominant majority. Examples include Irish Catholics who vote for the leftist party in Britain versus; “good” Catholics who vote conservative in France, or Catholics in Germany who vote for the Christian-democratic party, and industrial workers who live in densely populated working class areas versus the same kind of workers who live in middle-class districts. These notions of “minority context” and “majoritarian context” are directly related to the issue of status incongruence, because in many places minorities live in a more or less hostile environment. In such cases, three concepts are involved: status incongruence, minority complex and cross-pressure.

Contradictory propositions have been suggested concerning the political effects of upward and downward mobility in terms of status incongruence. According to some scholars, upward mobility favors a conservative orientation, and downward mobility a liberal-leftist tendency. Others scholars have arrived at the opposite conclusion. This confusing situation can be explained by the neglect of the social context by those who extrapolate at the national level the results obtained at the local level. Most studies on status incongruence have been conducted in particular cities (including Lenski’s study, 1954 and 1966). It is a misleading to generalize from a series of local monographs,

which, taken together, do not represent a truly national sample. «Consistency theory seeks to show that predictable effects result from the combination or interaction of statuses, and that these effects differ from the effects of several independent variables» (Rossides 1976: 87). However, in practice it is difficult to weigh the importance of each variable in the social context. In one case, it may be a question of race; in another, income, and in still another, professional position. Extrapolated at national level, these variables conceal important variations across local social contexts.

### *Status Incongruence and Individualism*

Most frequently, status inconsistency refers to individuals, not to collectivities. Incongruence of status is a characteristic of a relationship between individuals. When an individual cannot raise the lower factors of the incongruence he or she tends to avoid people who react to them (Malewski 1963: 306). He or she makes an individual move. If an individual can raise the lower factor, «he has a natural tendency to think of himself in terms of that status or rank which is highest, and to expect others to do the same, (but) others, who come in contact with him, have a vested interest in doing just the opposite, that is, in treating him in terms of the lowest status or rank» (Lanski 1966: 87). Even in this case, the relationship is between individuals. Vertical mobility separates ascending individuals from non-mobile peers who remain in their status of origin. A high rate of individual upward mobility breaks the unity of the social class, by effectively promoting certain people and generating in the minds of others expectations of moving out of the class and into a better one. As R. Dahrendorf has noted, a high rate of upward mobility favors individualism to the detriment of class consciousness.

However, high rates of downward mobility may have the opposite effect, favoring, as Marx emphasized, the spread of class consciousness. In that case, the tendency is not to leave the group but to identify oneself with others in the same situation of incongruence of status. In some social contexts that aggregate individuals, such as large factories, mines, railways, working class suburbs, and ghettos in large cities, the phenomenon of individual status incongruence blooms into a collective social consciousness and a “minority complex”.

### *Configurations of Status Incongruences*

The amount of status inconsistencies depends on the configuration of three dimensions, that may be dichotomized for analytic purposes.

a) *Culturally homogeneous societies versus heterogeneous societies.* In recent decades, immigration in Western countries has differed from that of former times. In most cases, immigrants who came in past from Western Europe to the US and Canada required only two generations for complete assimilation into the dominant culture. More recent immigrants in Western countries came from the southern rim of the Mediterranean and Africa. Not only are their distinctive characteristics religious and linguistic, they also differ in skin shade. Their integration requests more than two generations, and many of them manifest a preference for multiculturalism, that is, for a recognition and institutionalization of ethnic diversity. Such diversity is currently a source of status inconsistencies but may have different effects in the future.

b) *Segmented versus fluid societies.* Heterogeneous countries may be segmented or fluid. Segmented societies are divided into religious or linguistic communities as in Belgium and Northern Ireland or into “pillars”, as in the Netherlands until the middle of 1980s (Lijphart 1977). In these societies, there is little room for ethnic status inconsistency. By contrast, in fluid societies, the crossing of vertical and transversal cleavages is relatively common, and generates incongruences.

c) *High versus low vertical mobility.* Another dichotomy is related to the amount of vertical social mobility on the economic scale, which may be relatively high or relatively low. The fact that a high vertical mobility, either upward or downward, increases the frequency of incongruence of statuses is well-established.

These three factors have a cumulative effect on the proportion of people who experience incongruence of statuses.

### **Status Incongruence at the Elite Level**

What is missing in Pareto’s “circulation of elites” is the concept of status incongruence. This is surprising in the writings of someone who emphasized the importance of upward and downward social mobility. If the concept of status incongruence was applied to the highest levels of society, elite studies would be enhanced. The psychological portrait of some of the world’s most famous painters could be better understood in the light of status inconsistency. The biographies of masters such as Michelangelo, Bellini, Bosch, Goya, van Gogh, Toulouse Lautrec, could be enriched by an interpretation in terms of status incongruence. Many novelists, including Dostoievski, Tolstoi, Stendhal, Balzac, de Lampedusa, Proust, and Dumas have, in their own style, analyzed the psychological aspects of status inconsistency, even if they have not explicitly used that sociological term. One of the main themes of *Le Rouge et le Noir* and of *Gattopardo* is status inconsistency. The most common case that of is the

rich man's daughter who becomes enamored of a young man of lower status. No sociologist has ever explored the hundreds of cases of status incongruence described by famous writers, starting with Shakespeare's, *Romeo and Juliet*.

The concept of status incongruence should be applied even to saints. The best analyses of the personality of the evangelist Paul have been written by theologians and religious historians who, have used the notion of status inconsistency implicitly. The subtitle of Dieter Hilbrand's *Saul-Paul, A Double Life*, is significant. M.S. Baslez insists on the status incongruence of Saint Paul: Born as a Roman citizen but at the periphery, in Syria; he was a stranger in Ephesus; a polyglot Jew, an apostate, and the son of a pharisee, he was rejected as a missionary in many communities. Paul had accumulated many incongruencies. Moses, as the nephew of the pharaoh, and Muhammad, as the poor husband of a rich wife, are incarnations of status inconsistencies.

The use of the concept of status incongruence is appropriate for a better understanding of political leaders from Spartacus to Robespierre and from Trotsky to Castro and many other revolutionary leaders. There are in the literature numerous examples of status incongruence of athletes, clergymen, businessmen, politicians, poets, and movies stars, but this notion has been insufficiently used to explain the metamorphosis of labor leaders. The concept could even be applied to sociologists themselves for a better understanding of the theories and motivations of great scholars such as Pareto, Michels, Veblen, Sorokin, Mills, Lazarsfeld and others.

### *The Relevance of Status Incongruence Today*

The incidence of status incongruence in advanced societies today is many times higher than it was in earlier generations. This upsurge is a result of increasing upward and downward economic mobility, the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of Western societies (as a consequence of massive non-European immigration), and of a better perception of inequalities and the spread of "multiculturalism", as opposed to the doctrine of the melting-pot, particularly among the so-called "second generation", which is composed of the sons and daughters of immigrants.

Four decades ago, status incongruence was usually a question of an imbalance between education, income, occupation, religion and gender. Today it originates primarily in ethnic and racial intermingling. Meanwhile religious differences have become less prominent.

In most Western societies, on both sides at the Atlantic, a homogeneous social and political majority no longer exists. Any conceivable majority is necessarily composed of multiple minorities of all kinds. An advanced society is a



multidimensional society that includes many parallel hierarchies. The political game consist precisely in building coalitions of minorities to crystallize a temporary and instable political-electoral majority. In almost all these countries, the leftist party has become the party of amalgamated minorities, of those who experience frustrations generated by status incongruences and the psychological complex of belonging to a minority. In the US the electorate of the Democratic party is much more ethnically heterogeneous than is its adversary. It is a conglomerate of minorities. In France, the leftist coalition has officially adopted the label "plural majority". Without the concept of status incongruence, it would be difficult to explain its electoral success.

Projections of demographic trends suggest that Western societies are becoming increasingly diversified along a non-economic axis and that the amount of status incongruences nourished by ethnic and racial characteristics will increase.

A mountain of statistics has been collected showing that objective inequality and social consciousness explain only a relatively small part of the variance in studies of social stratification. What must be added is an interpretation in terms of status congruence-incongruence.

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