

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND ATTITUDES

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The Theory of Defense of One's Own Position: Self-Esteem and Conscience—The Ideologies of Privileged Groups

1. In the last thirty years, variation of opinion in accordance with income, occupation, status in the community, or class awareness has often been investigated.¹ The results of some of these investigations have shown, for example, that in the United States and West European countries the higher income groups are more in favor of certain institutional property rights and more against government control of business and further extension of government welfare activities.²

In the present paper, I would like to show, first, that in a country where large-scale enterprises are government-owned, and political power is vested in the hands of the Communist party, quite opposite correlations may occur. Second, I will try to present a theory which may account for both kinds of correlations, as well as for certain findings traditionally considered as belonging to industrial sociology, the sociology of ethnic relations, or the sociology of military life.

2. The data that will be presented was obtained by a survey made in Warsaw in 1958. This survey was conducted among 1,530 employees (mainly factory workers, engineers, and white-collar workers) of various governmental enterprises and offices. The study was concerned mainly, but not exclusively, with attitudes toward the ruling economic system and toward the existing difference of incomes.³

To discover the attitudes of various occupational and income groups toward basic features of Poland's economic system, we asked, for instance, whether private enterprise should be allowed in large-scale industry, on large agricultural estates, or in the wholesale trades. We asked whether the high incomes of private enterprises should be limited by high taxation, and whether the workers' councils ought to be the real managers of the factories or only advisory boards—or if they were necessary at all.

¹ For a summary and analysis of the survey evidence on attitudes of various classes, see J. A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure*. New York: Rinehart, 1957; B. Barber, *Social Stratification*. New York: Warcourt-Brace, 1957; M.M. Gordon, *Social Class in American Sociology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1958.

² See, for instance, A. Kornhauser, "Public Opinion and Social Class," *American Journal of Sociology*, 55 (1950), p. 334, and S. M. Lipset, P. F. Lazarsfeld, A. Barton and J. Linz, "The Psychology of Voting," in G. Lidzey (ed.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. II. Cambridge: Addison Wesley, 1954; H. Cantril (ed.), *Public Opinion 1935–1946*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951, p. 350–351 and others.

³ Because of some peculiar difficulties and practical limitations this must be seen as only a rough picture. Further investigation seems to be desirable.

Table 1

The Attitudes of the Various Income Groups Toward Private Enterprise, in Per Cent

	Incomes, in zlotys per month					
	700–1000 (N = 163)	1001–1500 (N = 27)	1501–2000 (N = 356)	2001–2500 (N = 197)	2501–3000 (N = 106)	3001–4000 (N = 69)
Against admitting private enterprise to the big Industries	54.0	65.1	79.1	85.2	82.0	91.4
Against admitting private enterprise to the large agricultural estates	53.4	52.0	66.9	64.5	61.3	78.3
Against permitting Wholesale trade in private hands	38.6	47.5	57.3	61.9	61.3	68.1
For the high taxing of private enterprise	58.3	58.2	67.1	68.5	65.1	75.4

Table 1 shows the distribution of answers to some of these questions according to the incomes of the surveyed groups.

As can be seen from Table 1, compared to the lower income levels, the higher income groups were more opposed to the admission of private enterprise to large-scale industry, large land-ownership, or wholesale trade, and much more in favor of limiting the incomes of private enterprises by high taxes.

The data presented above should not be interpreted solely as evidence that lower income groups in Poland are strongly in favor of private enterprise. The attitudes of the lower income groups were characterized rather by indifference and lack of interest in whether the executives of enterprises are appointed by the government or by private owners. This is suggested by the fact that with the decrease in income levels, the proportion of answers favorable to private enterprise in the above-mentioned fields increases very slowly, but the proportion of people who have no opinion on these matters increases very rapidly.

Table 2 provides some similar findings. When we compare the opinions of people of different occupations, it appears that engineers were much more against private enterprise in the basic fields of the economy than were factory workers. It may be seen from the above that in Warsaw, contrary to the United States, opposition to private enterprise increases with the rise in socio-economic status.⁴

Some other correlations are found to be similar in Poland and the United States. A negative answer to the question "Should the difference between the highest and lowest incomes be reduced?" was given by 64.3% of people earning 5,000–8,000 zlotys monthly and by 6.8% of people earning 700–1,000 zlotys monthly. To the question "How high should the top level of income be?" 21% of engineers and 1% of workers answered "no limit." The question "Should people with higher education earn more than those without higher education?" was answered in the affirmative by 89.7% of people with college educations and only by 20% of people with elementary education. In Poland, as in the United States, the disposition to equalization increases with the lowering in socio-economic status.

3. The similarities, as well as differences, in the attitudes of higher income groups may be explained by a theory which I propose to call the "theory of defending one's own posi-

⁴ It must be remembered that the sample consisted only of employees of government enterprises and offices. Neither peasants nor businessmen were included.

Table 2

The Attitudes of Engineers and Workers Toward Private Enterprise

	Occupation	Decidedly or rather yes	No opinion	Decidedly or rather not	No answer ^a
Are you for admitting private enterprise to large industry?	Engineers (N = 280)	3.6	1.4	93.2	1.8
	factory workers (N = 504)	12.3	10.1	55.0	22.6
Are you for admitting private enterprise to the larger agricultural estates?	Engineers (N = 280)	14.7	6.8	75.7	2.8
	factory workers (N = 504)	20.2	10.3	47.8	21.7
Are you for admitting private enterprise to the wholesale trade?	Engineers (N = 280)	21.6	7.5	61.8	2.5
	factory workers (N = 504)	28.2	12.5	43.3	22.6
Do you think it is just to limit the high income of private enterprises by high taxation?	Engineers (N = 280)	73.2	2.5	20.4	3.9
	factory workers (N = 504)	57.0	7.9	23.0	12.1

^aTo make certain that the respondents knew their answers would be anonymous seemed to be one of the most important problems in this study. Consequently, the questionnaires were filled out by the people surveyed themselves. This accounts for the large number of "no answer" responses to some questions.

tion, self-esteem, and conscience." The theory states that those groups that have a greater share of wealth, prestige, and power than others tend to defend the characteristics of the existing system, which has enabled them to achieve and retain their relatively superior position, and they also tend to reject beliefs that could threaten their position, their ego, or their conscience.

In accordance with this theory, the higher income groups, with a greater feeling of economic security, tend to display stronger acceptance for programs that defend the existing economic differences and the existing economic system. If this system is based on private ownership, as it is in the United States, they defend private ownership. If it is based, as in Poland, on government ownership, they defend government ownership more strongly.

4. This theory is not limited to accounting for differences in opinions between different social classes. It may help to explain many other results traditionally considered as belonging to the sociology of ethnic relationships,⁵ the sociology of industry, or the sociology of military life.⁶ Whites versus blacks in the southern United States, executives and foremen compared to workers in Poland, officers compared to enlisted men in the U.S. Army—these are just selected cases of groups which have greater income, greater prestige, and, as a rule, greater power. Some differences in the opinions between these groups may be explained as resulting from the unequal share in scarce goods and from the striving to defend one's own

⁵ See, for instance, M. King, "The Minority Course," *Am. Soc. Review*, 21 (1956), pp. 80–83.

⁶ Compare, H. Speier, "The American Soldier and the Sociology of Military Organization," in R. K. Merton and P. F. Lazarsfeld (eds.), *Continuities in Social Research*. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950.

position, self-esteem, and conscience. Consequently, in the next part of this paper, I will use the evidence from these seemingly different domains.⁷

The theory presented above can account not only for difference in the acceptance of various kinds of programs, but also differences in the explanations, predictions, and evaluations that are accepted.⁸ Let us try to describe in general terms some patterns in the assertions and evaluations common to various privileged groups.

5. The conviction that the situation of others is unbearable could result in guilt feelings and threaten the consciences of the members of privileged groups. Thus, according to the theory described above, it can be expected that people with higher status in a hierarchy of wealth, prestige, or power will show a tendency to overlook and underestimate the deprivations experienced by people occupying less profitable positions. This is confirmed by evidence from various investigations. For instance, white soldiers, much more often than black ones, accepted the opinion that the majority of black soldiers had the chance to contribute as much as they would like to the war effort.⁹ The officers were much more inclined than the enlisted men to believe that all or most officers would readily agree to participate in the very same situations they were ordering their soldiers to undergo,¹⁰ that the criticism in soldiers' letters published by the Army newspaper was untrue,¹¹ and that the overall situation in which enlisted men found themselves was quite satisfactory.¹²

6. The tendency described above may be considered a portion—though a rather substantial one—of a more general tendency. People with a higher share of income, prestige, and power tend to be more satisfied with the existing system. Consequently, the conclusion to be derived from our theory is that members of this group will tend to support the features of the existing system that help to maintain their own higher positions and place their own egos in a more favorable light. This is further confirmed by investigations in political sociology, the sociology of ethnic relations, the sociology of industry, and the sociology of military life. Studies of the U.S. Army show that a far greater percentage of officers than soldiers was inclined to agree that the army “always keeps its promises,”¹³ that promotions are based on knowledge not acquaintances,¹⁴ or that the army tries its best to praise and reward those who really are good soldiers.¹⁵

The same patterns can be seen in a Polish survey of industrial relations.¹⁶ Factory executives propagandize that production levels were raised above the established norms. In

⁷ R. K. Merton and A. Kitt remarked that the traditional divisions of social sciences into the sociology of ethnic relations, the sociology of industry, or the sociology of military life obscures the similarity of psychological and sociological processes occurring in all these domains. (See R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957, p.) This is exactly the point of view of the present paper.

⁸ The importance of these distinctions for the clarification of the sociological language is stressed by H. L. Zetterberg, “Compliant Actions,” *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 2, Copenhagen, 1957, pp. 180–183.

⁹ S. S. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*, Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 1949, p. 511.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 280 and 282–3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁶ The Survey was made in 1959. The subjects were 156 foremen and 769 factory workers. The distributions of age, sex, and geographic region in the sample corresponded to the distribution in the population of all persons employed in government enterprises.

considering the role in production of those who met the goal, 40% of foremen and 62% of workers were of the opinion that such leaders were not liked by their fellow workers. 42% of foremen and 64% of workers considered them to be causing undue haste and anxiety. 40% of the foremen and 62% of the workers were of the opinion that such work leaders were rapidly deteriorating physically, and so on. While speaking of the efficiency norms set up in their factory, 64% of foremen and 45% of the workers considered them to be fair; 59% of the foremen and 42% of the workers thought they were helping to do the job. Those who have more power and obtain greater income from a system are more likely to assert that all is right within the existing system.

7. Sometimes, however, such facts as poverty, exploitation, bad housing conditions, lack of educational facilities, general discrimination, dissatisfaction, or the open revolt of certain underprivileged groups against the existing conditions are so striking that they cannot be denied. Explaining such facts by highlighting the faults of the existing social system may threaten one's own position. Thus, according to our theory, it may be expected that the members of privileged groups will tend to explain such circumstances by factors not connected with the existing system and its social inequalities. So, for instance, southern whites in the United States often explain the social inferiority of the black population by the blacks' so-called "biological inferiority."¹⁷ The unemployment affecting various groups was often explained (by privileged people) as due to laziness on the part of those who were out of work. Dissatisfaction or active demonstrations against existing conditions is often explained as due to the subversive activity of foreign agitators.¹⁸ Wrongs, deprivations, and a rise in disappointment and hostility are explained by errors and faults committed by particular functionaries of the system. Sometimes it is Stalin, sometimes the leaders of trade unions, sometimes a certain pope, and sometimes particular large landowners. But the on-going system itself is considered to be all right.

Groups that have seized power in a revolutionary way are inclined to explain all shortcomings as an inheritance from the preceding system. For instance, one of the elements of official Stalinist ideology was that a conflict between workers and factory management cannot exist in a socialist society because both sides pursue a common goal: to raise production and improve the cultural and material environment of the workers. All conflicts which may happen are due to capitalistic remnants in men's consciousness, causing bureaucratic distortions and egoistic claims.¹⁹

The preceding explanations have, in spite of their diversity, one common element. It is the tendency to explain all unfavorable facts by elements that are foreign to the existing system and especially foreign to the existing social inequalities. Holding such a specific selection of elements responsible for facts considered unfavorable is characteristic of the way of thinking of the very groups that have a greater share of wealth, prestige, and power.

¹⁷ See, J. Dollard, *Castle and Class in a Southern Town*. New York: Doubleday, 1957, pp. 368-373 and G. Myradal, *An American Dilemma*. New York: Harper, 1944.

¹⁸ See J. Dollard, op. cit., p. 285. "When discontent is to be accounted for, it is then done not by asking what conditions are actually imposed on the inferior with which he might legitimately be discontented, but rather by asserting that someone has 'put ideas into his head.' This is the familiar picture of the 'outside agitator' who is responsible for discontent in patriarchal industrial enterprises in the North." Similar explanations can be found, for instance, in "Rerum Novarum" by Pope Leo XIII, and in Stalinist ideology.

¹⁹ See, for instance, R. Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry*. New York: J. Wiley, 1959, p. 367.

8. The conviction that the existing social privileges are unjustified would threaten the existence of these privileges as well as the self-worth of people occupying the more profitable positions in the hierarchies of wealth, prestige, and power. So it may be expected that members of privileged groups will be prone to explain their better positions by factors that simultaneously justify them according to existing evaluations. In the United States, the middle class was more inclined than the working class to accept the opinion that most people who are successful are successful because of ability.²⁰ In Sweden, the upper and middle classes were more inclined than the working class to believe that differences in education were the chief reason for class distinctions; and the former were much less likely to consider differences of income to be the chief reason for those class distinctions.²¹ Southern whites in the United States often explain the reservation of some occupations for whites by a lack of ability on the part of the blacks, who are viewed as being incapable of performing these jobs. The denial of civil rights and suffrage to blacks is explained by the alleged fact that blacks are childish, immature, and insufficiently developed. A similar explanation is given for the differences in access to education.²² The opinion that “officers deserve extra rights and privileges because they have more responsibility than enlisted men” was accepted by 67% of American officers and only 23% of enlisted men.²³ An ideology popular among whites in the southern states claims that blacks like their lower status and that anyone who attempts to change it is not a “true friend,” since the blacks themselves are not seeking advancement. Thus, privileged groups are prone to express opinions that justify their specific advantages.

9. The trend toward greater equality would threaten the positions of the privileged class. From the theory presented in this paper it follows that the members of privileged groups tend to predict that all changes tending to reduce social inequalities would have unfavorable consequences. For instance, these changes would negatively affect the very functioning of the existing system or be harmful to the whole population (including the underprivileged).

This is further confirmed by evidence obtained from different studies. The great majority of large businessmen in a U.S. study rejected the opinion that everyone would be happier, more secure, and more prosperous if the working class were given more power and more influence in government;²⁴ they also rejected the opinion that wages would be fairer, jobs more stable, and that fewer people would be out of work if the government were to supervise the industries.²⁵ American Army captains were prone to accept the opinion—strongly rejected by the enlisted men—that officers would lose the respect of their subordinates if they were to fraternize with them.²⁶ The members of privileged ethnic groups often believe that to increase the wages of low-paid workers would result only in greater expenditures on drinking and gambling,²⁷ and that the abolition of segregation in residential districts

²⁰ R. Centers. *The Psychology of Social Classes*. Princeton Univ. Press, 1949, p. 147.

²¹ H. Centril (ed.), *Public Opinion*, op. cit., p. 117.

²² G. Myrdal, op. cit., pp. 106–108.

²³ S. Stouffer, op. cit., I, p. 374.

²⁴ R. Centers, op. cit., p. 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁶ S. Stouffer, op. cit., p. 374.

²⁷ See W. G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1954, p. 210.

would disturb the functioning of the existing economic system.²⁸ The same predictions have a quite different probability in the eyes of people occupying different positions in the hierarchies of wealth, prestige, and power.²⁹

10. Let us show other evidence which seems to support our theory. Many investigators tend to admit the simple generalization that higher income groups are more conservative than lower income groups and more content with the status quo. But it is well known that this greater conservatism is limited only to certain issues. Thus, the generalization is supplemented by the additional information that in some fields the attitudes of the higher income groups are not more conservative and are sometimes even more radical. Examples may be given for both kinds of issues. It is said, for instance, that the attitudes of the highest income groups toward ethnic minorities, international affairs, religion, or the labor of women fail to support the hypothesis according to which the higher income groups are more conservative.

Our theory seems to answer the question of why some attitudes belong to the first category and others to the second and how both these categories can be described in general terms. If certain beliefs are more likely to threaten the position, ego, or conscience of members of privileged groups, they are more likely to be rejected by such groups. If they have no such function, the difference in positions need not be accompanied by differences in attitudes. The deviation from the relationship between a higher position and greater conservatism seems to accord with our theory.

Conclusions

11. Data obtained from a country in which large-scale Industries are owned by the government and political power is in the hands of the Communist party suggested the modification and generalization of the previously established hypothesis concerning the relationship between high socio-economic position and more favorable attitudes toward unlimited private property rights. The more general theory was thus presented. I have tried to show that this theory can account for some of the findings established in seemingly different branches of sociology and can foretell certain patterns of description, explanation, evaluation, and prediction that seem to be characteristic of the way of thinking of many privileged groups. Some of these patterns were briefly presented.

Certainly the theory presented needs some qualifications. In my opinion, to develop this theory further, it would be necessary 1) to analyze deviations from the patterns of thinking displayed; 2) to examine the intervening psychological variables that cause these patterns, and the social situations in which some of these variables at least are absent or weakened; 3) to examine the social situations in which groups occupying lower positions in the hierarchies of wealth, prestige, and power are fully satisfied with their lower positions and strongly accept the existing social inequalities. Limitations of space do not allow me to discuss these problems more thoroughly in the present paper.

²⁸ G. Myrdal, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

²⁹ See A. Kornhauser, "Analysis of 'Class' Structure of Contemporary American Society," in G. W. Hartman and T. Newcomb (ed.), *Industrial Conflict*. New York: Cordon, 1939; A. Kornhauser, "Public Opinion and Social Class," *op. cit.*, p. 334; R. Centers, *The Psychology of Social Classes*, *op. cit.*, p. ; H. J. Eyesnck, "Social Attitude and Social Class," *British Journ. of Soc.*, Vol. LV (1950), pp. 55-66.