

INEQUALITY IN THE PHILIPPINES: OLD BOTTLENECKS AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

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Inequality is a prominent feature of Philippine society, and sociologists have devoted considerable attention to the examination of aspects of that inequality. However, the approaches utilized have in many cases failed to greatly advance our understanding of inequality. The causes of inequality have been especially ignored. This paper emphasizes the shortcomings of the dominant stratification perspective and points to alternative sociological orientations for research. The author also comments on the nature of sociological work on the 'poor,' the 'rich' and the 'middle sectors' and identifies subject areas and modes of inquiry which have been neglected and which require urgent attention. The complex multi-dimensional nature of inequality is stressed throughout the paper.

Introduction

Even the most casual observer cannot fail to be struck by the high degree of inequality that characterizes Philippine society. Thus, it comes as no surprise to find that social scientists have devoted much time and effort to the analysis of this inequality. However, a review of the literature reveals certain problems and omissions. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss various aspects of the treatment afforded to Philippine inequality and to suggest little uses or new possibilities for sociological enquiry. My first concern is with the identification of the analytical cul-de-sacs which have limited the usefulness and explanatory power of much existing work. Following from this, I intend to indicate alternative sociological avenues which could be explored in order to gain greater insight into the manner in which Philippine society allocates its scarce resources among the population.

Stratification

The concept of stratification has both dominated the literature on Philippine inequality and been responsible for restricting the understanding of that inequality. The idea of stratification derives from geological science where it is employed to describe layers of different rocks placed on top of each other.

Transferred to the realm of sociology it refers to distinctive social groups, the strata, vertically arranged in a hierarchy according to the possession of resources such as wealth, income and education. Thus, individuals can be ranked along a scale according to a criterion or a set of criteria. This perspective on inequality was transplanted into Philippine sociology from the United States where it emerged as a dominant mode of enquiry in the 1950s. Its application in the Philippines while providing much valuable data has contributed little to our knowledge of the generation, operation and maintenance of marked inequality. Indeed, two of the most remarkable features of the study of Philippine inequality have been the uncritical acceptance of the stratification concept and the absence of any dialogue between the advocates of the various schemes of social gradation (e.g. Fox 1956; Lynch 1959; Hunt 1963; Anderson 1964; Cordero and Panopio 1969; Magdalena and Zarco 1970; Cespedes 1971; Doeppers 1971). While most of the writings cited above are over a decade old, it does appear that subsequent work has provided little challenge to their mode of enquiry. In the rest of this section I hope to demonstrate the analytical limitations of the stratification perspective as it has been applied to Philippine society.

A fundamental weakness of stratification

models is that they tend to ignore the basic sociological concern of relationships between individuals and groups. The dominant methodology of Philippine stratification focuses on placing individuals into discrete boxes according to the possession or lack of particular criteria. Level of income, ownership of land, occupation and racial identity are typical characteristics utilized for slotting people into the appropriate strata of the researcher's model. While this tells us a great deal about the actual distribution of resources it is singularly uninformative about why such a distribution has taken place. The reader is presented with a static picture of society, a description of who has what at a particular time in a specified geographical location. While such facts may be vital data it is nonetheless a central sociological task to explain why a society allocates its resources in a certain manner. Enquiry must be concerned with the mechanics of distribution and this involves close examination of the relations between individuals and groups. It is after all the nature of these relations which determine how resources are allocated.

Following from these observations it is apparent that Philippine models of stratification are largely incapable of accommodating explanations of social change. Because stratification concentrates on description and the ordering of facts it avoids involvement in the prediction of future trends. It also eschews consideration of the past, as the grading of people into strata demands no historical perspective. This devaluation of history is unacceptable as it is only through analysis of the past that the present can be understood. The current distribution of society's resources should not be artificially frozen in time but should always be viewed in a historical context. This does not mean the simple descriptive comparison of two or more chronologically separate periods. History has a creative role to play in contemporary Philippine sociology and the identification and incorporation of important historical processes into explanations of present-day inequality is

a vital requirement. Static models of stratification have not been able to accomplish this task.

A further weakness of most models of Philippine stratification has been their lack of concern with questions of concept and theory. Some writers might argue that these matters are intellectual diversions of little importance (Cespedes, 1971: 24). However, I would contend that they are fundamental considerations whose neglect has had a detrimental effect on the study and understanding of inequality in the Philippines. The most striking deficiency has been the minimal attention paid to the vital conceptual difference between class and status. Class is an economic phenomenon defined according to relationships in the economic system. A person's class position is his location in the economic processes of production, distribution and exchange. In contrast, status is concerned with social estimation and prestige. It involves subjective evaluation and the process of ranking but it is not inevitable that a population's application of ranking criteria will create a hierarchy of discrete clearly bounded strata. The two concepts of class and status can be viewed sociologically as different bases for the study of inequality. They are not aspects of stratification but this is what has most often been assumed in Philippine models of stratification. The problem has been further compounded by either the inability to distinguish between these distinctive components of inequality or a lack of rigour in their application to empirical data. It appears that the insights to be gained from class and status analysis have been overlooked by many exponents of Philippine stratification schemes. The fundamental concepts of class and status have been mixed and confused and wrongly subsumed under a minor analytical device, stratification. As a result they have been deprived of their undoubted sociological utility for the investigation of Philippine inequality.

A related conceptual shortcoming of the

stratification approach occurs where strata are delineated and then through a terminological sleight of hand are identified as classes. First, it is seldom clear as to why particular criteria are chosen for locating individuals in the various strata. Different authors have opted for different criteria in order to construct their stratification hierarchies but these writers rarely explain the reasons for their choice. Second, it is not always obvious why strata boundaries are drawn at particular points on the scale. An element of arbitrariness seems to characterize this operation. Third, the concern of stratification is to locate people in strata according to the possession or non-possession of the selected criteria. There is a continuum along which each person can be placed. Thus, the focus is on relations of order and with quantification, with what people either have or have not got. This would seem to distract attention from the central concerns of sociology which are the relationships between individuals and groups. It is after all these qualitative phenomena which determine what a person gets or does not get. Most models of Philippine stratification seem incapable of incorporating these considerations for analysis. By their own terms of reference they can only identify precisely bounded statistical aggregates. Whether such categories conform to social reality and can help us to better comprehend the nature of Philippine society must remain open to doubt.

Poverty and affluence

In most countries, detailed research on inequality has necessarily focused on particular social groups or classes such as urban squatters, the rural poor or the middle sectors. The Philippines is no exception to this rule. However, this approach in Philippine sociology has led to certain analytical problems and omissions in much of the available literature.

The poor are both the largest and the most studied group in Philippine society. Despite

the increasing attention of social scientists to the plight of the poor, the condition of poverty has become the unwelcome lot for greater numbers of Filipinos in recent years (Bowring 1981: 125). Social science has made a valuable contribution to our understanding and awareness of poverty but the analysis of the causes has been neglected in the rush to describe their effects. David (1977) provides a clear picture of the types of urban poverty research conducted in the Philippines. In one methodological camp, he identifies the precise anthropological accounts of life in the slums and squatter settlements as documented by those oriented to the 'culture of poverty' or the 'sociology of coping mechanisms' approaches. A second group of researchers are characterized as 'census-takers' as their objective is to collect quantifiable information which they can draw statistical portraits of urban poverty. Finally, there are a few persons who advance the notion of a 'holistic approach' in which poverty is examined as a social system. While all of these perspectives have their own strengths they all seem to balk at the basic question, 'why are people poor'? This is the sociological problem to which poverty research and analysis should be increasingly addressed.

In order to furnish an answer, I would suggest that more attention should be paid to class analysis. This is by no means the only method of studying poverty nor will it provide a total explanation of the phenomenon but it is an important and under-utilized avenue for investigation. As indicated in the preceding section class is not stratification and class analysis is not concerned with placing individuals in the precisely bounded boxes of a stratification hierarchy. The fundamental task of class analysis is to locate persons in the economic processes of production, distribution and exchange. Sociological interest is thus directed at relationships between individuals and groups and the explanation of poverty is revealed in the examination of the unequal relationships between the different classes in

the Philippine social structure. However, class analysis does not cease once the vital relationships have been identified. It must also seek to uncover how class relations are established, maintained, reproduced and modified over time. The results of these relations are of course reflected in the findings of the existing schools of poverty research. Class analysis merely digs a little deeper and begins to unearth answers to the questions of 'Why are people poor?'

An immediate and obvious advantage of using class for the analysis of poverty is that it dispenses with the notion that the poor are some kind of monolithic social category. It is certainly true that they share a common set of conditions such as inadequate housing, undernourishment and low income but they are not a homogenous group in the manner of their integration into the Philippine social structure. Such people as street vendors, landless rural labourers, small-scale tenant farmers and urban wage earners are linked to the wider society by different sets of socio-economic relationships. There are distinctive class positions among the poor and it seems feasible that the best interests of one section might not coincide with the best interests of another. For example, in the 1970s many coconut farmers were lifted above the 'poverty line' by high prices for their product. But, the cost of coconut oil rose for consumers and led to a serious nationwide deficiency in fat intake (Bowring 1981: 130). Thus, action taken to alleviate poverty for one section of the community may have an adverse effect on other groups struggling to maintain a meagre existence. A class explanation of poverty can accommodate such considerations as it rejects the functionalist derived perspective whereby the poor are identified as one or more self-contained sub-systems separated from the rest of Philippine society. Instead of concentrating on the description of poor lifestyles class analysis seeks to uncover the different ways in which the poor are integrated into the Philippine social structure.

If sociology can offer explanations of why Filipinos are poor then remedial action can be taken by dismantling the machinery of a highly unequal distributive system and rebuilding the system on the basis of greater social equity.

At this juncture it should be reiterated and stressed that while class analysis provided insights into the nature of poverty and the structure of inequality in general it does not have the capacity to explain everything. As I discovered in my own research (Turner 1977) the unequal distribution of societal resources is a complex phenomenon which cannot be satisfactorily reduced to a one-dimensional approach. Thus, for a full sociological understanding of poverty in the Philippines it appears essential that attention is paid to a range of issues concerning status, values and ideology, kinship, patron-client relations, power and demography. Also, full use should be made of personnel from other disciplines such as soil scientists and nutritionists if a truly informed picture is to be constructed. Poverty does not acknowledge disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, the study of poverty should be based on careful empirical investigation coupled with conceptual rigour. All too often in contemporary 'development studies' authors employ ill-defined notions such as imperialism and proceed to ascribe everything that they view as wrong with a particular society to those notions. The result is that we start to assume what in fact should be demonstrated. This is not intended as an apologetic for Western colonialism and present-day rich country/poor country relations. Rather, I am urging students of Philippine poverty to avoid emotive elastic concepts and their associated yet often unsubstantiated generalizations and opt for a more rigorous approach which will be of more benefit to Philippine social science and to the numerous Filipinos who exist at the margins of subsistence.

One final note on poverty concerns its occurrence in rural areas. Although work on

rural poverty has a long history (e.g. Lava 1938) and has attracted some attention in recent years (e.g. Yengoyan 1974; Illo 1977; Ledesma 1977; Castillo 1979; Carner 1980; Ofreneo, 1980) it is apparent in a recent bibliography (Abad and Eviota 1982) that the urban areas have received by far the greater scrutiny. The major reason for this imbalance is a matter of geographical convenience. As social scientists or planners are generally urban based and as urban poverty is spatially concentrated the study of urban poverty is a far easier operation than scouring the countryside in search of the rural poor. Thus, there is an urgent need for more empirical research in the rural areas where the poor are often more dispersed, less accessible and less visible than their urban counterparts. The need for this work is emphasized by the simple fact that many of the urban poor have migrated to the towns in an often forlorn effort to escape from poverty in the barrio. Added to this is the disturbing possibility that the incidence of rural poverty may have been underestimated. Chambers (1981) has stated the case most forcibly in a recent article where he argues that there are major obstacles to perceiving the nature and extent of rural poverty in developing countries. His observations may well have relevance for the Philippines.

According to Chambers (1981) there are six sets of biases which hinder the perception of rural poverty amongst those whose work is to conduct research or implement development strategies. First, there is a preference for visiting settlements on or very near to tarmac roads and for travel close to urban centres. Even within villages poor people may be hidden away from the main streets and the places where people meet. Second, researchers tend to go where something is happening and consequently end up studying development projects. This may direct attention away from many of the rural poor who are located in less favoured areas. Third, officials and researchers have most field contact with persons who are biased against

poor people. Rural elites, males and the most active tend to be the ones who provide information and from whom impressions are drawn. Fourth, visits to rural areas are most frequent in the dry season when food stocks are adequate, body weights are rising, diseases are diminishing and ceremonies are in full swing. By contrast the wet season is a time of hardship and deprivation and a time of few visits from the urban based professionals. The rural poor are thus least visible when things are at their worst. Fifth, visitors to the rural areas may be deterred by combinations of politeness and timidity from approaching, meeting and listening to and learning from the poorer people. Finally, professional specialization may make it difficult for observers to see the 'holism of poverty,' how a wide range of factors reinforce each other to cause and maintain poverty. Furthermore, it may be hard for the professional specialist to identify and understand the view of the world as seen by the rural poor. Researchers investigating rural poverty in the Philippines must be made aware of these dangerous biases and must take appropriate action to minimize the distortions in research findings which these biases can cause.

Moving to the opposite end of the spectrum in the Philippine stratification hierarchy one finds the rich, the most privileged group of people in the country. According to the World Bank (Cheetham and Hawkins 1976: 51) 10% of Filipino families account for 36.9% of total urban family income and 30.81% of total family expenditure. A similarly skewed distribution is characteristic of family income and expenditure in the rural areas. These basic facts of inequality are well-known but there is little in the way of additional information which has been assembled and analyzed. Original studies of the rich are few and far between both at national and provincial levels (Simbulan 1965; Makil 1975; Doherty 1979; Wurfel 1979) although there was a tradition of enquiry into political leadership (e.g., Hollnsteiner 1963; Lande 1965; Agpalo

1972; Kerkvliet 1974). The reasons for the paucity of literature on the sociology of affluence are not difficult to find. First, despite their prominence the rich are not easily accessible to the social scientist. They are powerful and can thus easily exclude researchers from investigation into many facets of their lives. Unlike the poor the rich do not require help or publicity from sociologists and they may even regard the enquiries of researchers as potential threats to their position of privilege. Second, the study of wealth and privilege may be a politically sensitive issue in a society where principles of equality and fair distribution of resources are oft-repeated development objectives (e.g. Marcos 1973). Finally, social scientists concerned with injustice in society's distributive system tend to be attracted to the poor with whom they empathize and whose plight they wish to expose. Thus, the social conscience of the student of inequality often directs his or her attention to those in need and overlooks those who have acquired large shares of society's scarce resources. Despite these difficulties the investigation of the rich should be a central concern for researchers enquiring into the nature of Philippine inequality especially as the accumulation of wealth may give us insight into the causes and persistence of poverty. Several avenues for study can be readily identified.

As mentioned previously there is a considerable literature devoted to the 'culture of poverty' in the Philippines. However, there is no such body of work focusing on what might be termed the 'culture of affluence'. Detailed systematic documentation of the lifestyles of the rich does not appear to exist. The intrepid participant observer may have penetrated every nook and cranny in Tondo, but admittance to Forbes Park and Dasmariñas Village has been severely restricted. Nevertheless, the Philippine public is fed with a steady diet of information concerning the activities and lifestyles of the rich via the pages of magazines and newspapers, the screens of television and

cinema and in radio broadcasts. These glimpses of the elite are somewhat unsatisfactory from a sociological point of view. Not only are they incomplete and patchy, but also the nature of their presentation has contributed towards the ideological notion that such lifestyles are legitimate and to be admired. This type of bias is sociologically unacceptable although the transmission and acceptance of this ideology is worthy of study in the same way that it was demonstrated how illusions about poverty are created and sustained by the mass media in the Philippines (Samson and others 1977). While the 'culture of affluence' is likely to remain largely inaccessible to the sociologist there do seem to be opportunities in the analysis of elite ideology and its effect on Philippine society.

Another urgent research need is for the identification and analysis of the social and economic relations which bind the rich to the rest of the Philippine population. That the rich extract high rewards in Philippine society is obvious and well-known but the question which needs answering is: "how are they able to extract such high rewards?" A tempting mode of response is to rely on the dubious explanatory power of vaguely formulated prefabricated catchphrases which through frequent repetition can sometimes appear to offer great analytical insight. However, such catchphrases, though easy to reproduce, are not likely to make any significant contribution to our understanding of the position of the rich in Philippine society. A combination of conceptual clarity and empirical thoroughness are the desired characteristics for producing valid sociological results. In adopting such an approach one may have to dispense with the notion of the rich as a monolithic category. It would appear that a number of class positions exist which allow individuals or families to obtain large shares of societal resources. The statistical condition of richness is merely the end product of location in the economic processes of production, distribution and exchange. Although

pinpointing these privileged locations would be a great sociological service such class analysis does not reveal the full complexity of the situation.

Three additional types of often overlapping social relationships demand attention. First, there is the matter of kinship, the most enduring feature of Philippine society. Not only is it important to identify the kinship links which bind rich families to each other but also efforts should be made to elucidate the mutual obligations which these links entail especially as they influence the nature of economic relations. A detailed historical study of intermarriage between recognized elite families would certainly make fascinating reading. Second, there is the analysis of patron-client relations. Although much informative work has been undertaken on this subject it has either concentrated exclusively on politics (e.g. Hollsteiner 1963; Lande 1965) or on rural society (Scott and Kerkvliet 1973). There has been little data gathered about patron-client relationships forged between the urban based rich and their dependents. Patron-client relations are typically between landlord and tenant farmer but it may also be the case that similar social links bind the rich with other classes and groups in Philippine society. My own researches in a provincial town of Luzon revealed the persistence and continued importance of this form of social relationship (Turner 1977). Finally, there is the supposed longstanding tradition of acquiring wealth through political channels. Almost two decades ago it was observed that in the emergent countries of the Third World 'wealth derives from political power; it does not create it' (Worsley 1964: 193). Perhaps it is time to seek an empirical verification or repudiation of this claim for the Philippines. Canoy (1980) has assembled data which leads him to conclude that Worsley's statement is appropriate for the contemporary Philippines. However, much more 'digging' needs to be undertaken in this highly sensitive area.

A final concern for students of inequality is the large segment of the population who are neither rich nor poor. While this group of people do by necessity appear in the stratification hierarchies of various authors they have not received special sociological attention like the poor. Why has this group, composed of white collar workers, businessmen, small-scale property owners and some skilled manual personnel, been largely disregarded by the sociological profession? Several reasons can be suggested but each is tentative. First, this group is not perceived as being deprived and exploited like the poor and so do not readily catch the attention of the socially conscious researcher. In addition the planner knows that the group is not a 'social problem' and thus seldom merits his special concern or attracts agency research funding. Second, the group is not highly privileged and may possibly be seen to extract an equitable share of societal resources from the distributive system. Obviously the rewards obtained by people in this group are greater than those gathered by the poor but they are also very different from the rewards reaped by the rich. These considerations may contribute towards the creation of a climate of academic disinterest in these middle sectors. This situation may be reinforced by the fact that most Philippine social scientists originate from and remain located in this section of society. Closeness to and wide knowledge of the group may encourage sociologists to look elsewhere in their quest for research topics. It is not so much a case of familiarity breeding contempt but rather familiarity nurturing disinterest. Foreign researchers also seem to have displayed little enthusiasm for studying the group yet it is with the middle sectors that these academics in many cases have most contact and from whom they gathered much information.

It is quite apparent that the scope for investigation and analysis is wide although I will confine my suggestions to a few avenues for sociological enquiry which should provide a profitable yield. In this section I have

utilized the term 'middle sectors' as a loose classification for the group. Class analysis should reveal several distinctive class positions. For example, the salaried white collar worker occupies a different location in the economic processes of production, distribution and exchange than the businessman. The imported concept of middle class thus appears inappropriate and if it is to be used at all it can only refer to a common lifestyle enjoyed by the occupants of a range of class positions. While it is difficult to escape entirely from spatial metaphor in class analysis notions of lower, middle and upper should not be automatically included in class schemes. Such labels belong to stratification hierarchies and not to the analysis of socio-economic relationships.

Having elucidated the class positions of the middle sectors one difficult problem may well emerge. Into what category do you place persons and families who engage in a number of income earning activities? How, for example, do you classify a family where both husband and wife are white collar workers and also own some farmland and a jeepney? In my own work I opted for the concept of multiple class position in order to solve this sociological problem. Much investigation and conceptual clarification still remains to be done.

More research also needs to be undertaken on the social links of kinship and patron-client relations. One cannot hope to fully understand the distribution of resources in the Philippines without reference to these relationships. Class analysis is important but for a fuller grasp of the nature of inequality it is essential that the social ties of kinship and patron-client relations are studied. Resources are channelled along these networks, power is asserted through them and status can be accrued from them. The middle sectors are enmeshed in these relationships both between themselves and with persons in different class positions. Thus, for an informed picture of the middle sectors in the contemporary

Philippines the student of inequality must be concerned with the identification and meaning of these vital social links.

A final subject for sociological enquiry is social mobility. Research attention could focus on the social origin of incumbents of middle sector class positions. Included in this would be the detailed documentation of how individuals have reached the class or even occupational position in which they are currently situated. Such research would indicate how far the middle sectors have recruited persons from other class positions and whether openings are being gradually closed and classes or class positions are increasingly self-perpetuating. Surprisingly, there seems to have been little interest in social mobility, though it would seem to be a field of study which could provide insights into many of the socio-economic processes operating in Philippine society. The middle sectors are of major concern in the study of mobility as it is largely they who have absorbed the socially mobile in the past. Whether they are still a common destination for the upwardly mobile or whether they have progressively restricted access to all but the most talented outsiders remain to be demonstrated by careful investigation and analysis.

Conclusion

While I have levelled various criticisms at the study of inequality in the Philippines, I hope that this will not be viewed as a destructive exercise. There are valuable insights and data to be gained from the existing literature but certain analytical perspectives have already achieved their full potential in contributing to our knowledge and understanding of inequality. The current need is both for the adoption of some new approaches and for the revitalization or expansion of some underutilized modes of enquiry. In addition there are aspects of inequality that have escaped the attention of sociologists interested in this general field of

study. If there is no action on these matters, then, the study of inequality will not advance and our comprehension of the way in which Philippine society allocates its scarce resources will be poorly perceived and open to ill-informed and possibly misleading interpretation. I hope that some of the suggestions made in this article will act as useful guides to researchers who are willing and able to combine thorough empirical enquiry with conceptual rigour and the elusive intuitive insight of the sociological imagination. The application of such qualities to the study of Philippine inequality will greatly enhance our knowledge and understanding of the subject.

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