

# Is new zealand aotearoa a classless society

Society



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I declare the following to be my own work, unless otherwise referenced, as defined by Unitec New Zealand's policy on plagiarism. This essay will argue that New Zealand/Aotearoa is not a classless society. Moreover, it will also be demonstrated that New Zealand is a stratified society of which class is only one part, and that gender is the basis of social stratification. This discussion will begin with a definition of some key terms.

In determining that New Zealand is not a classless society, the historical definition of class will be examined and then developments in New Zealand's society explored to ascertain the place class occupies in contemporary New Zealand society. At this point the discussion will revert to the position that gender is the dominant form of stratification and evidence will be provided to support this. Throughout the essay the effect of the industrial revolution will be explored as a mechanism that contributed to both class and gender consciousness.

In concluding, an explanation of my own socially constructed perspective which has informed the position I have adopted will also be offered. Before proceeding with this argument, it is first necessary to define two key terms used in discussing this topic: class and stratification. Stratification refers to the hierarchical organisation of groups within a society and the social inequality this produces (Jary & Jary, 2005). Stratification and class utilise such similar terminology in their analysis of structured inequalities that class analysis and social stratification often are inseparable concepts.

Class is a term that has complex implications but at its simplest level, and echoing stratification, is also defined in the Collins Dictionary of Sociology as

the hierarchical distinctions that exist in society (Jary & Jary, 2005).

Sociologists agree that all societies are stratified in some way. A simple distinction between the two terms is that stratification can exist independently of class, but class and stratification are inseparable, since class is a form of stratification.

The effect of stratification on any society is that by its hierarchical and divisive nature it marginalises and disadvantages those outside of the dominant discourse and favours those who conform to that discourse. It forms distinct groups of people and is exclusive in nature, creating an “us and them” paradigm. Marx argued that class was the fundamental form of social stratification and that the control of economic resources and wealth defined class structure. Moreover, Marx argued that class was determined by an individual’s relationship to the mode of production.

Marx developed his theory after analysing the structure of society, which resulted from the capitalist economy created by the industrial revolution. The two distinct classes this relationship formed were based on the exploitation of the proletariat by the capitalists (McLennan, Ryan & Spoonley, 2004). Marx’s definition of class prevailed to a certain degree throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and many theorists adopted elements of his definition, although his position of class as being the fundamental form of stratification has been challenged.

Weber agreed with Marx that economic relations were a determinant of class, but argued that inequality could not just be explained in terms of ownership and property, and that in addition, status and party must also be

taken into account (Osborne & Van Loon, 2004). Weber, therefore, held a similar view to my own in that class is simply one means of stratification, although as with most other sociologists of his era, gender as a form of stratification was discounted.

More recently, Giddens (1997, p. 43) defines class “ as a large scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead. He continues in this definition that the “ ownership of wealth, together with occupation are the chief bases of class differences”. The similarities to Marx’s theory are apparent, although this definition does not inextricably link class divisions to the mode of production. This essay will adopt Marx’s definition of class in examining class as a form of stratification in New Zealand.

Most discussions regarding class adopt a position that it is related to work and economic life; that it is determined (at least at some level) by employment status and financial affluence. Conversely, the neo-Weberian theory postulates that position in the housing market broadly determines class, (McLennan et al. , 2004) and although this appears valid it is my opinion that culture rather than class underpins this theory. This view is supported by Conley (2001) in her study on housing and social stratification.

I find it is often as difficult to separate class from culture and ethnicity as it is to separate class and stratification, since they each contain elements common to each other. Day (2001, p. 200) supports this view in stating that “ ultimately, of course, race, gender, sexuality and culture cannot be separated from class. ” Even allowing for differences in definition, class

stratification is evident in New Zealand though its significance has diminished, as will be demonstrated.

An analysis of class commonly involves the terms “ upper class”, “ middle class” and “ working class”. These terms were introduced to New Zealand through the period of colonisation in which Britain sought to expand its empire into new markets. Although the colonisers brought with them the prevailing discourses underpinning their white, western culture, it was also their intent to escape the restraints of the class structure of their homeland (McLennan et al. , 2004). This in itself supports my view that class divisions are less pronounced in New Zealand. In continuing this argument, it is impossible for me to present this analysis of the class structure in New Zealand without also being influenced by my own interpretation of class, acquired through having been born and raised in England, where class has historically been a dominant social order. It is my view that membership to the upper class is not just dependent on social status in terms of wealth, occupation and ownership.

It has a unique culture of its own and is more often than not something one is born into rather than acquired. This culture includes one’s accent, how one dresses and behaves, where and with whom one socialises, one’s hobbies, school attended etc. Financial affluence is usually inherited and “ newmoney” is unwelcome and excluded. In New Zealand this same level of class culture does not exist, social mobility is more notable and entry into the upper classes depends largely on wealth than other non tangible forms of social status.

In this regard, access to the upper class, and movement between the classes - which in themselves are less defined - is available to all (although usually on the basis of financial success), and is not limited to an exclusive club. I therefore interpret class divisions as being much weaker in New Zealand. Returning now to Marx's analysis of class, one of its limitations is that it does not account for the middle class, the nature of which has changed enormously due to changes in capitalist production and new forms of ownership.

Historically the working class was comprised of blue collar workers or manual labourers; the middle class, white collar workers and professionals; and the upper class, the aristocracy, the very wealthy and business/land owners (SocINDEX, 2003). Changes in New Zealand's economy transformed the nature of employment and further diminished the fluid class boundaries that did exist. Post war economic prosperity, characterised by full employment, and the introduction of the welfare state diluted the financial disparities between the classes and in doing so also further weakened class divisions.

More recently de-industrialisation, characterising the era of post-Fordism, and the formation of new service and technology based industries have contributed to significant changes in the working class structure of the manufacturing industry. The policy of economic rationalisation adopted in the 1980's has also contributed to the evolution of an underclass which never previously existed (McLennan et al. , 2004). As well as affecting the working class, these economic developments have also changed the nature of the middle class.

Embourgeoisement refers to the process of the working class becoming more like the middle class, and is characterised by the rise in white collar jobs at the expense of the decline in secondary sector industries. In addition, the rising standards of living of blue collar workers have contributed to increased levels of affluence, whereby many now own their own homes and have the purchasing power to access all manner of consumer goods to which they were previously financially excluded (Giddens, 1997).

Home ownership is another factor which supports the argument against class stratification in New Zealand, according to Marx's theory. Whereas Marx linked class to the means of production, a growing debate centres on stratification now being shaped more to changes in consumption (Saunders, 1990). This is particularly relevant in New Zealand since currently 70% of the population are home owners and this has been a source of income for many.

However, it has been counter-argued that property as a source of income predominantly occurs in the main centres of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and that with property booms and slumps, much also depends on the time property was purchased. In addition, property commonly remains in the family and therefore tends to reinforce the financial position of the family rather than alter it dramatically (McLennan et al. , 2004). As a final word on the subject of class I would like to return to the importance Marx also places on the exploitation of the workers by the business owners.

In many industries today business owners are beginning to recognise the link between how workers are valued and increased production and profitability. In reward of their efforts employees are often invited to share in the

profitability of the company, and reap the rewards of their own labour by access to employee share purchase schemes. With increased funding being provided by capital injections from various shareholders, the nature of ownership is further questioned and the link between ownership and production is defined in unlimited shades of grey rather than Marx's black and white theory.

Having demonstrated that class does still exist in New Zealand, but that its nature has altered due to various factors, I now return to my argument that gender is the dominant form of stratification. McLennan et al. (2004, p. 143) agree that "there remains a reluctance...to see class as a central defining characteristic of New Zealand..." and that "gender or ethnicity are important markers of group membership, and therefore are the basis for stratification" (p. 139). In societies stratified by gender it is most often women who are disadvantaged, due to the patriarchal society that is characteristic of most first world civilisations.

Indeed, the sociological discourse itself has historically privileged a very andocentric view in which sociological research has mostly focussed on men (Giddens, 1997; Osborne & Van Loon, 2004). The fact that sociology has historically been biased towards a male perspective offers support to my argument that gender is the dominant form of stratification in developed western societies. I will now expand upon this argument further and offer evidence in support of this claim. From the very moment a child is born society is preoccupied with gender, and boys and girls are treated differently based purely on sexual differences.



This often begins with the way children are dressed – blue for a boy and pink for a girl. McLennan et al. (2004) point out that although this might seem trivial, it amplifies the importance that is placed on gender and highlights the various settings to which gender differentiation is applied. In continuing to illustrate the development of the social construction of gender, by about age three both girls and boys have developed a gender identity, although they have little understanding of what that means.

At a young age children also develop gender role awareness, or a knowledge of what behaviours are expected of them (Morris & Maisto, 2002). Harold Garfunkel (1967) expanded on this concept and argued that in addition to the assignment of gender at birth, masculinity and femininity are discourses that are accomplished through our behaviours. In this way gender roles are ascribed and traits are learned through an ongoing process of socialisation. The following quote highlights the profound effects that gender socialisation produces: Gender assignment will shape the child's life in a myriad of ways, influencing the clothes it wears, the sports it plays, the education it receives, the kind of job it will have, its income level, the illnesses it will suffer – perhaps it will even explain how he or she will die. " (McLennan et al. , 2004, p. 60) It is apparent from the above quote that life chances differ dramatically between the sexes and that gender is a fundamental factor which influences many, if not all, areas of life from birth to death.

Giddens (1997, p. 260) supports this view in stating that " gender itself is one of the most profound examples of stratification". Upon analysing New Zealand society it is clear that the gendered discourse privileges men and marginalises women. James & Saville-Smith (1989) give credence to this <https://assignbuster.com/is-new-zealand-aotearoa-a-classless-society/>

statement in acknowledging that “ the gendered culture itself is progressively being acknowledged, and not only by feminists, as a source of social disorder and social problems”.

Employment status is another considerable means of social stratification in New Zealand and is inextricably linked to gender, although that is not to say that it is only women who are marginalised through employment.

Nevertheless, its inclusion is relevant to my argument on gender stratification in three ways: gender is a dominant aspect of stratification in the area of work and economic life; work is a fundamental element of human existence; and women are the principal group marginalised by employment.

The dominant discourse regarding work in New Zealand is that paid work is more socially and economically significant than other forms of work. This in itself creates a gendered discourse that marginalises women. In New Zealand, studies by Marilyn Waring agree that women’s unpaid work is vitally important, that it contributes significantly to the economy and well-being of society, but is typically ignored (cited in McLennan et al. , 2004).

The notion of work as excluding domestic labour is one effect of the andocentric perspective that underpins New Zealand society.

As in other colonised countries, the woman’s role in New Zealand has been to provide unpaid care-giving and household services, whereas the man is considered the income earner (Robertson, 2001). In addition, men are regarded as dominant, strong and aggressive, whereas women are considered passive, emotional and nurturing. New Zealand’s gendered culture financially disadvantages mothers by restricting their participation in

the paid labour market and therefore, the life chances women are afforded are severely restricted. As such, women are marginalised both biologically and psychologically.

Biological accounts of gender tie women's destinies to their bodies as opposed to the psychological theory that has already been discussed, based on gender as a social construction. It was the emerging capitalist economy resulting from the industrial revolution which redefined the nature of work. As a result of this separation of work from home domestic work was devalued since it was not rewarded with payment. The industrial revolution also gave rise to the sexual division of labour which ascribed gender roles to specific activities, and defined them as being women's work or men's work.

As a result, in capitalist societies, women are concentrated in particular industries, such as the caring professions, and receive lower levels of pay than their male counterparts. In New Zealand women's average earnings equate to only 77. 1% of male earnings (cited in McLennan et al. , 2004). It is also a sociological truth that the opportunity for women to hold positions of superiority in the workforce is much lower than for men (Osborne & Van Loon, 2004).

The workforce is not the only place where gender differences are apparent. There are also clear gender differences regarding the division of labour in the home and much of women's work is rendered invisible by applying the concept of work only to those activities for which payment is received. Studies have shown that regardless of the number of hours women spend in paid work, their domestic responsibilities at home decrease only very

slightly, and they continue to spend many more hours in unpaid work than men do (Else, 1997).

This significantly contributes to women's position of disadvantage in society as Else (1997, p. 19) argues in the following quote: " It can not be too strongly stressed that the primary cause of women's disadvantageous financial position and their consequently high level of financial dependence (on male earnings or on the state) is not that they are deficient in various measures – for example in terms of skill, experience, or ' working hours' – compared with men.

Instead it is that they carry excessresponsibilityfor unpaid work, particularly childcare. " In addition to gender being a contributing factor in restricting women's access to the workforce, women are also disadvantaged when they have secured employment, as illustrated in the following quote from Davis and Jackson (1993, pp. 150-151): The reality is...that women, particularly women with domestic commitments, may not be in as strong a position to negotiate wages, employment conditions and training opportunities of their own choice as men...[Their disadvantage results] from three fundamental factors: the way that women are socialized and perceived; the impact of care commitments on choice; and the effect of present structural inequalities. The argument thus far has provided substantial evidence that gender is the fundamental form of stratification in New Zealand and that class no longer holds the dominance it enjoyed historically.

Some sociologists even argue that we are moving towards a completely classless society (Osborne & Van Loon, 2004). As already alluded to, much

depends on the definition given to class and as with all other discourses, class is a discourse that is socially constructed and is affected by culture and time. It must also be noted that although this essay has adopted a feminist perspective, the intention is not to discount other forms of gender based stratification such as homosexuality.

Gender socialisation occurs across a multitude of domains. It is written into laws concerning which sexes may marry one another and until very recently outlawed homosexual relationships between men. The church is still an institution which unlawfully criminalises homosexuality and excludes women from certain positions in its hierarchy. It has been demonstrated that human beings are conditioned by gender from birth and the gendered roles we are ascribed affect us both at home and at work, undoubtedly the two largest sectors of life.

Moreover, gender also impacts on leisure time and to a large extent determines the sports and relaxation activities that are deemed appropriate for the different sexes. Perhaps one of the few occasions when we are not affected by gender is when we are asleep! In closing I feel it necessary to state that this essay reflects my own unique socially constructed viewpoint in adopting the feminist perspective of placing gender at the centre of this discussion. My experience of society centres on the fact that I am a woman first and foremost.

Secondary to my gender is my culture: I am a white woman of English heritage. This is somewhat dichotomous in its effect, since as a white person I form part of the dominant (and therefore privileged) culture, yet as a

woman I am continually marginalised and disadvantaged by my gender. I have little doubt that a black man would feel more marginalised by his culture than his gender and would therefore consider culture to be a more dominant form of stratification than gender.