

1973-03-13a: [SOCIETY: THEORY] MOUSNIER,

According to the three significant historical kinds of stratification that have occurred, according to Mousnier (and are there really any others?), two are ephemeral or fossilizing: caste (hereditary religious) and class (economic control). The remaining one, orders, grabs almost all of the western historical examples. Beginning as he does in 1450, the vexing problem of whether feudalism is caste is avoided; anyway, Mousnier doesn't believe that caste occurred anywhere in west. Class, on the other hand is very restricted, occurring only in a few instances as a passing phase, a momentary phenomenon between kinds of orders. So, in effect, all of western history becomes the history of orders. Indeed, orders seems to be the essence of western social history.

The definition of orders in general is social, as opposed to caste (religious) and class (economic). The sub-criteria of orders, however includes legal, social, economic, religious, power & ideology. [For the moment we can pass by the fact that this is not a logical division since social cannot appear in the genus & the species both.] Thus the normal operation of economic & religious is subsumed under orders, a species of one genus, while the operation of economics & religion as genus is made almost aberrant. This slight of hand is accomplished with great disingenuousness. p119) Mousnier notes that "a society of orders always implies an hierarchical principle" The title of the books is "Social hierarchies from 1450 to the Present." Class by his definition cannot be hierarchical, This is perhaps his main flaw: that the accepted hierarchical status in orders is absent elsewhere, but that in fact the hierarchy is always there. If Marx says class-consciousness is vital, so Mousnier says order-consciousness is vital--but, in fact, hierarchy is there de facto whether by law (caste), by economic power (class) or by agreement (orders). p. 125) In the process of formation of orders, the originally philosophical/religious period of enthusiasms must be followed by that of rigid orders, based on conformity to a dogma. This dogma, evidently, becomes a consensus after a generation or two, and society settles back. One has the feeling that this is normalcy, and that whatever substantial social transformations took place during the period of enthusiasm are finally rendered, by Mousnier's law of hierarchy, into quite the same kinds of social stratification according to function in society that had occurred before. The style of upper/lower class relations may be different, and the material differences between them (presumably) will be quite different. But the hierarchical character will always be there, and (I would guess) Mousnier would allow that the élite of a modern society has as much (indeed, thinking technologically, more) elegance & refinement as that of the pre-Revolutionary nobility. Plus ça change..., is a main component of his thinking. Or to put it another way, there is only coincidentally progress on a cultural/material level, and it matters far less than the eternal return to a sense--or consensus--of social order according to dignity, etc.

It is a pessimistic philosophy that stands on its merits as a view of human civilization. The main flaw is that it assumes that the normal condition must be one in which the strata of society over times are rather stable. It must assume hereditary operation of status, even though Mousnier never gets into the function of heredity but only affirms its operation regularly. It denies, therefore, that there can ever be a normal society in which the condition at birth is not the overwhelmingly decisive factor in the condition at maturity. It assumes that the consensus about dignity, etc., which decides the hierarchy of a society or orders, will be perpetual, and there is no way that that can be true unless the transit from youth to maturity is a growing into the belief in the system. Whenever there is a system whereby the transit is an open question, and doubt exists about where the individual will end up in the hierarchy, then the consensus about

the rightness of that structure is divorced from the belief of any individual about the right position he might be able to enjoy, and the rules of a society of orders are fundamentally changed. It is certain in my mind that Mousnier conceives of the diachronic stability of society resting upon easy perpetuation of the strata according to condition at birth. If he does not do so, he is blurring the functionalist description of society at a given moment (the heart of his stratification theory) with the dynamic elements that sustain social classes. He is assuming that those dynamics must operate to sustain the hierarchy over time. But in fact there is no necessary reason why this should be so. They may work to change the individual composition of the hierarchy over time in a way utterly unrelated to the perpetuation of class status (by heredity) over time in a normal "ordered" society. If this should happen, than society of orders operates by hierarchical notions only coincidentally, as an accident of the condition of birth of individuals, and not by some iron law. Here, as elsewhere, it is a matter of the functionalist description of society assuming that values of that society must support the functional position of individuals. Actually, the values of society can determine in an individual that he personally is not bound into, but is moving within, the hierarchy. The hierarchy is not a behaviourally determining structure (mostly by birth) but only an opportunity scale for him and all like him to match their ambition and their luck against

Enfin, Mousnier assumes that social hierarchy is a natural form, some providential design that must always apply. And deep beneath, this rests upon the assumption of hereditary progeneration (p. 127ff) of status. And so the hereditary principle must be with him a function of natural law.