

A Comparison of Karl Marx and Max Weber on Social Stratification

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Many of the contemporary theories of social stratification come from Karl Marx and Max Weber, two nineteenth-century philosophers and sociologists. Most of modern sociological research and writing about social stratification combines some aspects of Marx's thought with some of the ideas of Weber. An understanding of stratification theory is not complete without a review of their class paradigm. In this paper, I will firstly state the major points of their stratification theories respectively, and then, compare both their similar and different viewpoints.

Social Stratification on Marx

The first systematic theory of social class is formulated by Marx. Marx's class theory rests on the premise that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Marx, and Engels, 1967/1848, p.11). How does class arise? For Marx, the key concept is the mode of production. Class develop on the basis of different positions which individuals hold in the productive system of a society. Marx said,

The owners merely of labor-power, owners of capital, and landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profits, and ground rent...constitute the three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production. (Marx, 1962/1867, pp.862-863)

According to Marx, the mode of production is independent of any particular individual and is not subject to individual wills and purposes. In Marx's words:

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relation that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. (Marx, 1962/1867. p.389)

Therefore, the property relations have already been determined when men are born into the societies. These property relations give rise to different social classes. Once a man is considered as belonging to a particular class because of his birth, once he has become a worker or a capitalist, he is followed by that mode of behavior.

In the primitive society, according to Marx, there are no classes because the property belongs to the community. As economic system becomes more productive, private ownership of economic resources begins to emerge. Whoever controls the means of production can obtain the economic and political power. Furthermore, the owners are able to appropriate the surplus products leading to their further differentiation from the rest of the population.

As capitalism rises, Marx believes that there are only two classes: the capitalists, who own the means of production, and the workers, who can only depend on their own labor for survival. Though Marx realizes the other social groups such as: artisans, merchants, intellectuals, and small landowners, there are only two great classes significantly involved in the social order. Marx predicts that the minor groups, as a result, would be forced to choose either the capitalists or workers.

Marx believes that men in different relations to the means of production naturally have different interests. The capitalists seek the surplus or profit which have been created by the workers. The workers spontaneously resent this exploitation. But any expression of discontentment from the workers is hindered by the capitalists through their economic and political power.

According to Marx, the secondary institutions -- law, government, art, literature, science, and ideology-- usually act a role as to support and sustain this economic system. In other words, the secondary institutions are all gathered to serve the interests of the ruling class which is composed of the industrial bourgeoisie's. Marx writes,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every age the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production. (Marx and Engels, 1967/1848. p.176)

Therefore, the ideology usually vindicates the social inequality and make it seem equal. Moreover, according to Marx, the capitalists can acquire more efficient control over the products when the workers are disorganized, or when they are unaware of the sources of their lower and poor situation. Therefore, the workers do not actively seek to remove the causes of their misery.

However, because of a struggle for economic advantage and the alienation of the workers from their work, the workers become increasingly opposed to the bourgeoisie. Potential for change is inborn within capitalist society. According to Marx, at first, the workers are not aware of these potential for change. They may even identify with the bourgeoisie. The class consciousness of proletariat is not well developed. Until the workers become aware of their historic role and unite to improve their situation, the class consciousness and intentional struggle between two classes will occur.

In thinking about how a social class becomes able to take a collective action, Marx distinguished between objective and subjective classes. An objective class is one that has a visible, specific relationship to the means of production. The workers are a objective class that does not own capital, and the capitalists are an

objective class that does. Subjective class is more of a cultural concept. Subjective class depends on how the people in a given stratum of society actually perceive their situation as a class. If the workers, for example, are not aware of their situation and do not agree that their fortunes can improve only at the expense of another class (the capitalists), they are not a subjective class. Without this awareness of their situation, the workers are said to lack class consciousness. And without class consciousness they cannot form the political associations that will allow to fight effectively against the capitalists. Marx described the peasants of France as an objective class because of their shared experience as agriculturists with small landholding, but he was doubtful about their ability to form a subjective class:

A small holding, a peasant and his family; alongside them another small holding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these make up a village, and a few score of villages make up a Department. In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.... In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class.(Marx, 1963/1869, p.124)

However, the working class, Marx believed, would be different from the peasantry because its members would become conscious of their shared interests as a class.

Marx considered that the growing conflict between the working class or proletariat and the capitalist class or bourgeoisie would produce revolutions. In those revolutions the proletariat and its allies would depose the bourgeoisie and establish a new social order known as socialism. Under socialism the key institutions of capitalism-- Private ownership of the means of production, the market as the dominant economic institution, and the nation-state controlled by the bourgeoisie-- would be abolished. The new society would be classless because the economic institutions that produced classes would have been eliminated and all the members of society would collectively own the means of production.

Social stratification on Weber

Weber not only defines social stratification quite differently than Marx but adds two other concepts which he thinks are essential for describing systems of social class, namely status group and party. Weber refused to reduce stratification to class but saw it as multidimensional. This permits a far more sophisticated analysis of social stratification than is possible when stratification is simply reduced to variations in one's economic situation. Let us examine his concept of class first.

Weber defines class in terms of market position in so far as this determines "life-chances." The term "life-chances" is used by Weber to refer not just to material benefits but to anything which is desirable including living any working

conditions, opportunities for education, leisure, culture, etc. Weber gives us three criteria for the existence of social classes:

We may speak of a "class" when (1) a number of people have in common a special causal component of their life-chances in so far as (2) this component of represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. (Weber,1968/1922. p.181)

A class, then is a group of people who share in common the same life-chances in so far as this is determined by the power or lack of it to dispose of resources which they control or can provide in order to acquire income in the markets.

Weber recognizes that the distribution of property is one of the fundamental and common bases for class formation.

"Property" and "lack of property" are..... the basic categories of all class situation.(Weber, 1968/1922. p.182)

But possession of property or lack of it, for Weber, is only one of the criteria defining the existence of a class situation. Classes may be further subdivided in terms of the kind of property owner or the kind of skill or service that is offered.

The second concept of social class is status groups. Status groups, unlike classes, constitute communities. Weber defines status:

Every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor.(Weber, 1968/1922. p.187)

A status group, then, is a group with certain rights, privileges and opportunities for acquiring what is desirable. The status group is determined not by position in the market but by the possession of certain characteristics evaluated in the terms of worth, prestige, etc. To give a concrete example, one that Weber refers to himself, slaves are not a class in Weberian terms because their life-chances are not determined by them offering services in the market in return for something. They are a status group because their life-chances are determined by the fact of their servile status.

What is the relationship between class and status group? Weber indicates"

The status group can be knit to class situation: Class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinction. Property as such not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run, and with extraordinary regularity.(Weber, 1968/1922. p.187)

Therefore, class is not a group but a simple classification. Class includes all those individuals who fall within a certain scope, whether they are aware of it or not.

A status group, by contrast, is a collectivity that considers itself as a group and can be recognized by others.

Essential, Weber argues that members of a status group always keep their distance and exclusiveness from the others. Their lifestyles are expressed in a number of specific ways; such as, people offer hospitality only to social equals, restrict potential marriage partners to social equals, and practice unique social conventions and activities.

Of course, class and status group can be, and often are, closely associated and interlined. Indeed, Weber says property, as well as defining class position, is also frequently used as a criterion for membership in a status group, and usually becomes such a criterion in the long term. But class and status are not necessarily linked to one another:

Money and an entrepreneurial position are not in themselves status qualifications, although they may lead to them; and lack of property is not in itself a status disqualification, although this may be a reason for it. (Weber, 1968/1922.p:306).

The third concept that Weber uses is party. Whereas for Marx, a party was the class grown aware of itself, for Weber, parties might represent status groups, classes, and other grouping in society as well. Weber thinks of parties very broadly as including not only those that exist in the state but also those that may exist in a social club. Moreover, the goal of party action is not necessarily a "cause" directed at a class utility, it can also be "Personal sinecures, power, and from these, honor for the leader and the followers of the party. Usually the party aims at all these simultaneously" (Weber, 1968/1922. p:938).

Party actions are always directed toward a goal that is pursued in a planned manner.

Parties are, therefore, only possible within groups that have an associational character, that is, some rational order and a staff of persons available who are ready to enforce it. For parties aim precisely at influencing this staff, and if possible, to recruit from it party members. (Weber, 1968/1922,p.938)

According to Marx, class interests can lead to formation of parties and the status groups can also lead to the formation of parties. In most instances, however, Weber views parties as based in some degree upon class and in some degree upon status; but any combination is regarded as possible.

Though economic classes, status groups, and political parties are all phenomena of the distribution of power within a community, According to Weber, parties differed from classes and status groups in several crucial ways: While the central significance of classes is economic, and that of status groups is honor, "parties live a house of power." Parties are only possible within communities that have some rational order and "a staff of persons who are ready to enforce it. For parties aim precisely at influencing this staff, and, if possible, to recruit it from party followers." (Weber, 1968/1922. p.194)

Marx and Weber Compared

In many respects Weber's class theory was a reply to Marx's view. It is possible to view Weber's treatment of social class as an opposition to Marx's theory. This position would fail to recognize the many aspects of agreement between them. In this section, I will compare both the similarities and differences of Marx's and Weber's theories. First, their similarities are as follows:

(1). Both scholars agree that the economic system is the foundational factor in shaping the other systems of society. Class is the foremost objective feature of economic relations and class is founded upon property relations. Therefore, control of property is a basic fact in the determination of the life-chances of an individual or a class.

(2). Both of them recognize the function of market. The bourgeoisie control the means of production and have a monopoly uncertain kinds of opportunities and the proletariat have nothing to offer but their labor or services and are closed out of the competition.

(3). Both of them agree that the class position does not necessarily lead to economic or political action, however, the class action would more likely happen if life-chances diminish. In addition, they also agree that group conflict exists in the human society.

They also differ in several ways:

(1). A distinction between Marx's and Weber's theories lays in their different definitions of class. For Marx, class is not a question of size of income, amount of wealth, occupation, life-style, birth background, etc. For Marx, class is fundamentally a question of relationship to the means of production and place a person occupies in the social organization of production. Therefore, in the capitalist society, there are only two basic classes: the bourgeoisie who own the means of production, and the proletariat who can depend only on their own labor for income. Whereas, Weber defines class in terms of the differential access to market rewards. For Weber, class is a group of people who stand objectively in the same situation in terms of market position.

(2). Marx's conception of class is a dichotomous one. There are, in any class system, always two major classes which are interdependent and antagonistic to one another. Therefore, Marx considers, in a capitalist society, it display a basic division of class between capitalists and proletarians. However, Weber's map of the class structure is much more detailed than Marx's. Both those who own property and those who do not can be further subdivided. Thus those capitalists who do not lead acquisitive lives are rentiers, while those who do are entrepreneurs. The workers can be differentiated into four classes: middle classes, skilled workers, semiskilled workers, and unskilled workers. (Jonathan H. Turner, 1989)

(3). Marx treats class as a purely economic phenomena, therefore, controlling the property is a basic factor in determination of a class. However, as opposed to Marx's single economic dimension, Weber adds two other dimensions: power, and prestige. Weber considers class, power, and prestige as three separate units. Property differences generate classes; power differences generate parties; and prestige differences generate status.

(4). In accord with his focus on the sphere of economic production, Marx has documented in great detail the capitalist expropriation of the workers by the means of production. Weber argues that such expropriation is an inescapable result of any system of rationalized and centrally coordinated production, rather than just being a consequence of capitalism.

(5). For Marx, power is always rooted in economic relations. Those who own the means of production can exercise political power either directly or indirectly. Weber agrees that economic power is the predominant form, especially in the modern capitalist world. But he thinks that the emergence of economic power may be the consequence of power that exist on other grounds. For example, even a salaried employee can have a great deal of economic power, if he occupies a position in the large-scale bureaucratic organizations. (Lewis A. Coser, 1977).

(6). According to Marx, the proletariat was intent to develop class consciousness and act for their common class interest once the appropriate conditions were present. However, Weber did not conceive classes as self-conscious groups, but merely as aggregates of people in similar economic positions and they are unlikely to unite into action groups to fight for their interests.

(7). Marx thinks that the proletariat have not recognized its true class interests. However, he affirms that they would, in the long run. By placing more emphasis upon a subjective construction of situation. Weber contends, class interests are ambiguous. People in the same class situation, as classified by an outside observer, may not regard themselves as being in the same situation. Thus, Weber concludes, neither possessions nor life chances indispensable produce class actions. (Anthony Giddens, 1981)

(8). Marx believes that human history is characterized by the struggle of human groups between the oppressors and the oppressed. Class interests and confrontations are the central determinant of social and historical process. However, the concepts of class conflict do not play as important role in Weber's thought as it does in Marx's. For Weber, class conflicts are not the main motor of historical change, only the possible consequence of particular kinds of class structure. The property classes can under certain circumstances give rise to class struggle, but that struggle is only a result of class situation. (Christopher McCall, 1990)

(9). Marx believes alienation to be as a transitional stage on the road to emancipation. The future will be a classless society in which each person should receive goods according to needs and should work according to ability. For Weber, he does not believe in the future leap from the realm of necessity into the world of freedom. Weber argues that bureaucratization of the modern world has led to its depersonalization seemed to be inescapable. Therefore, Weber tends to assert that mankind's world in the future would be an "iron cage" rather than a Garden of Eden.

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