

A-Level Sociology Teaching Notes

**Social Inequality:
Theories: Weber**

Introduction

In most sociology textbooks that discuss the work of Marx and Weber you will, eventually, come across the phrase that Weber's work on social stratification represents a,

"Dialogue with the ghost of Marx".

Since this is a textbook of sorts, there seems little reason to break with tradition and not give the cliché yet another airing...

So, while the above quotation may be a rather hackneyed phrase (to me and countless long-suffering sociology examiners, if not to you, since you're probably encountering it for the first time), it does sensitise us to a couple of major ideas (my advice here is to remember these ideas and forget about trying to sneak the quotation into your exam).

1. That Weber addressed many of the same concerns addressed by Marx.
2. That Weber came to substantially different conclusions to those interpreted by Marx.

While this should come as no great surprise if you've been studying sociology for some time (and I would suggest that it's probably a good idea to have gained some experience in handling sociological ideas and concepts before you attempt to tackle the concept of social stratification in any depth) - sociologists frequently interpret evidence in radically different ways - it should alert you to the fact that there are a number of clear differences between the ideas, arguments and conclusions put forward by Weber and Marx in relation to social stratification. The task of these Notes, therefore, is to help you understand and evaluate both Weber's ideas and their relationship to Marxist ideas.

Before we continue any further however, it might be useful to note that, for theoretical purposes, I've classified Weber as a "Conflict Theorist", for three good reasons:

- a. Firstly, because that is my interpretation of his general sociology.
- b. Secondly, because he talks in terms of the way in which social structures condition human behaviour. Weber recognizes the way in which structural relations theorized at the level of social class, status and power affect human behaviour and consciousness and his interpretation of this relationship makes him, I would suggest, rather different to Interactionist sociologists.
- c. Although Weber puts more emphasis than most structuralist sociologists on the importance of human consciousness and subjectivity, he does not make this the focus of his research. On the contrary, like most Conflict theorists, Weber analyses the nature of human consciousness within a structural context - he may have come to different conclusions to Marxist Conflict theorists, but he appears to have more in common with the latter (in terms of his central sociological concerns) than with Interactionist perspectives.

However, since the whole "perspective question" is such a significant one in relation to A-level sociology, this might be a good place to note a number of points raised by Mary **Maynard** ("Sociological Theory") in relation to the whole idea of "sociological perspectives"...

A. How Social Stratification Is Defined.

Unlike Marx, Weber's analysis of social stratification was not rooted in or linked to any attempt to formulate a general "historical analysis" of social development. While, in common with Marx, Weber argued that "class stratification" had a clear and important economic dimension, he believed that two other related dimensions of stratification, namely:

- a. Status and
- b. Party (or political power)

needed to be included if a full analysis and understanding of the rich social variety of different forms of social stratification was to be obtained.

Thus, as has been suggested above, in order to understand the relative significance of Weber's "three dimensions of stratification":

- a. Class
- b. Status and
- c. Party

we need initially to know how they are both defined and inter-related and, in order to do this we need to further understand that all three dimensions are, for Weber, rooted in the concept of power.

If you are unsure about how Weber (and others) have defined and used the concept of power then it would be useful to work your way through the Notes on "Concepts of Power" in the "Power and Politics" section of the course before you go any further (since the following assumes you have a basic understanding of Weber's use of the concept of power).

Central to Weber's analysis of social stratification in all its forms was the idea that we need to understand two basic things:

Firstly, how societies are organized in hierarchical systems of domination and subordination (in terms of both individual and collective hierarchies).

Secondly, the significance of power in the determination of social relationships based upon domination and subordination.

In this respect, there are two basic dimensions to the concept of power that we need to understand:

a. The possession of power:

According to Weber, the ability to possess power derives from the individual's ability to control various "social resources". These resources can be anything and everything and might include things like:

- Land,
- Capital,
- Social respect,
- Physical strength,
- Intellectual knowledge,
- etc.

In basic terms, the definition of a "social resource" is simply something that is both socially desirable and in some sense limited (that is, it can be possessed by some but not others). As I hope you will appreciate, this concept of "social resource" is both:

1. Extremely flexible (almost anything can qualify as a social resource) and
2. Liable to vary in time (for example, at different points in the historical development of a society) and space (for example, between different societies / cultures).

Activity

Give examples of "social resources" that have varied in their significance in both time and space. For example:

Time - In our society in the 1950s, ownership of a television was a form of power since it conferred status upon owners of this social resource. Nowadays, because television ownership is not limited, no such status is given to ownership of this resource.

Space - In our society, medical doctors are generally well-paid and have high status. This is not true of all societies (the old Soviet union being a good example).

b. The exercising of power:

The ability to exercise power takes a number of different forms, but all involve the idea that it means the ability to get your own way with others, regardless of their ability to resist you.

In terms of understanding the relationship between power and social stratification, Weber theorized the various ways in which societies are organized in hierarchical systems of domination and subordination using the following major concepts:

1. Class Power (Class):

This was theorized by Weber on the basis of "unequal access to material resources". For example, if I possess something that you want (or, better still from my point of view, need) then this makes me potentially more powerful than you. I am in a dominant position and you are in a subordinate position because I control access to a desired social resource.

A classic illustration here is the relationship between an employer and employee. Explain this relationship on the basis of control of resources / power.

2. Social Power (Status):

If you respect me or view me as your social superior, then I will potentially be able to exercise power over you (since you will respond positively to my instructions / commands). In this respect, social status is a social resource simply because I may have it while you may not...

3. Political Power (Party):

This form of power is related to the way in which the State is organized in modern social systems (involving the ability to make laws, for example). If you can influence this process of law creation then you will be in a potentially powerful position. Thus, by your ability to influence a decision-making process you possess power, even though you may not directly exercise that power personally. "Political parties" are the organizational means to possess power through the mechanism of the State and they include not just formally organized parties, but any group that is organized to influence the way in which power is exercised legitimately through the machinery of the State. For example:

Status groups (political organizations that exist to protect the social status of a particular group within society - for example: The British Medical Association)

Interest groups (political organizations that exist to advance the interests of a particular section of society by attempting to influence the way decisions are taken by government).

Activity**Give some examples of:****a. Status groups:****b. Interest groups:**

What this means, therefore, is that if you are in a position to influence a decision-making process then you are in a position of power. By your ability to influence this process you possess power, even though you may not directly exercise power. Obvious examples here might be exercising power through your ability to influence:

a. Political parties (for example, through donating money to them).

b. The making of laws (for example, through ownership of the mass media, your influence with a party in government).

In our political system, political parties are organized to possess power through the mechanism of the State. As I've suggested above, this involves not only formally organized political parties, but also any group that is organized to attempt to influence the way in which power is (legitimately) exercised through the agencies of the State (pressure groups, status groups, interest groups...).

One of the strengths of this approach to the understanding of social stratification is the fact that it identifies three separate - but inter-dependent - dimensions of stratification: namely class, status and power.

It's important that you don't see these three dimensions of stratification as "either / or" categories (that is, an individual as either economically powerful (class) or socially powerful (status) or politically powerful (party)). In the "real world" each dimension tends to be very closely related to one another such that:

People who are economically powerful tend also to have a relatively high standing in the community (status) and are able to use these two forms of power to influence the political process in some way (for example, attempting to influence the government into passing laws favourable to such people).

Activity

Using the concept of "values", show how we can apply this concept to understand the relationship between class and status in our society.

This separation between class, status and power was not unique to Weber, since if you think about it for a moment, we have seen that Marx was well aware of these three different forms of power. Like Weber, Marx viewed these dimensions of stratification as:

- a. Theoretically distinct and
- b. Empirically inter-dependent.

What this means, in simple terms, is that we can define these dimensions separately for the sake of theoretical convenience / clarity, but it is impossible to separate them empirically in the "real world" of human social interaction.

Where Marx tended to differ from Weber was in the basic emphasis he placed upon each of the three dimensions - the economic dimension was, according to Marx, the most significant one, since possession of economic power invariably leads to the possession of status and political power.

In this respect, we have already seen, in an earlier Study Pack, the way in which Marx related economic power to status and political power when he talked about the distinction between "infrastructure" and "superstructure" in society. To which of these areas, according to Marx, does each dimension of power belong?

Weber was, of course, also aware of the problems involved in the operationalisation of these three concepts, since it is evident that:

High class,
High status and
High power

are most commonly found together in our society (it is unusual, for example, to find someone who is immensely wealthy without their also enjoying high social status and political power).

However, where Weber differed from Marx was in the relative emphasis that he placed upon the significance of each dimension of stratification. As we have seen, class forms of stratification (your relationship to a means of production) tended, for Marx, to be most significant. The focus of Marx's analysis tended to be on the "system as a whole", rather than the individual problems of placement within that system.

Weber, on the other hand, was more concerned to analyse the way in which social systems were stratified "at the level of individuals / social groups" - the way in which, for example, people doing much the same sort of work could have quite different levels of status and / or power.

In this respect, we can see here two things:

a. The importance of "theoretical perspective".

Both Marx and Weber were looking at the same things, using very similar concepts. However, their analysis and conclusions tended to differ mainly because they were concerned to explain different things.

b. Marx and Weber were in many ways complimentary to each other, sociologically, in the sense that they both tell us useful things about the nature of social stratification.

Marx tells us something about the general nature of social stratification (a kind of "macro picture").

Weber tells us something about the specific nature of social stratification (a kind of "micro picture").

In this respect, this difference is reflected in terms of their overall theoretical perspectives, whereby Marx's "conflict approach" can be contrasted with Weber's "conflict perspective" on the basis that the former emphasized the importance of "social structure" (the way in which individual behaviour is conditioned by the general structure of social relationships) while the latter emphasized the importance of "social action" (the ability of individuals to influence the nature of their social relationships in sociologically significant ways). Since Weber's conception of "social action" is important, it might be opportune here to digress slightly by outlining some of the major elements in Weber's approach to the understanding of the social world...

Social Action Theory: A Weberian Perspective.

Max Weber is a difficult sociologist to pigeon-hole in perspective terms (for reasons that will become clear in a moment), since he doesn't fit neatly into the usual "Structuralist / Interactionist" dichotomy so beloved of sociology textbooks. However, in terms of this dichotomy, Weber is closer to the "Conflict Structuralist" perspective since it is clear that in much of his sociological analysis he focuses upon the way in which the structure of people's relationships influence (but not determine) people's behaviour.

The "confusion" over his theoretical status largely stems from the fact that Weber concerned himself with the attempt to make sense of the "rational basis" of the choices of behaviour made by individuals in their daily lives; that is, he attempted to analyse human behaviour at an individual level within the context of a clear sense of structural constraint (the "choices" we make about how to behave socially are clearly conditioned by the structural relationships which we both form and are formed by others).

For Weber, therefore, society is created through social interaction (it is not something that is "naturally given") and such interaction involves the conscious behaviour of thinking, reflective, individuals. People, in effect, make choices about their lives, their group memberships and so forth and these are neither pre-determined nor pre-destined.

As we have seen, power was a very important concept for Weber and he used it to explain the way in which societies both change and remain relatively stable and orderly. Social change, for Weber, came about in many ways:

- a. Purposeful social action - people thinking about the nature of society and acting purposefully to develop and change the way they live.
- b. The "unintended consequences" of social actions - for example, wars bring about social change in ways that may not have been intended by their participants...
- c. Economic conflicts that marry both purposeful social action and "unintended" outcomes.

In this respect, we can see that, unlike Marx, Weber emphasized the way in which social change could come about in ways that did not simply involve class conflicts (as we see when we look at his analysis of the relationship between social change and the role of religion). In this sense, therefore, power struggles occur throughout society and, while economic power is a crucial variable in this struggle, it is not the only one. Powerful groups other than social classes may arise within a society from time to time and the power struggle between them may involve interests that are not specifically economic.

In this respect, Weberian sociology is sometimes seen as a "pluralist perspective", in the sense that societies are invariably seen to involve a variety of different groups ("a plurality"), each possessing (or competing for) greater or lesser forms of power. As we have already seen, such groups may be of the class, status or party variety (or, more usually, a combination of each)

The basis of each group is:

- a. Class - the relationship each group has to the means of economic production, in addition to a variety of factors such as technical skills and educational qualifications that affect an individual's market situation independently of the ownership / non-ownership of property.
- b. Status - a group that is related on the basis of a "parity of esteem" (a group of equals), the basis for which is a group's "pattern of consumption" (or "lifestyle").
- c. Party - a group that is organized in some way for the taking / exercising of political power. Such groups may be class based, but they may also draw their membership from a variety of social classes.

On the basis of the above, social stratification represented, for Weber, the way in which the distribution of power in any society becomes "institutionalised" - that is, starts to assume a relatively stable pattern of social behaviour that exists over a long period - and the economic aspect (class) was considered to be neither more nor less important in terms of stratification than the status and party dimensions. To understand why this should be so we need to look briefly at the different sociological natures of the concepts of class, status and party.

1. Economic class, for Weber, was considered to be an objective sociological / political category. That is, it was a "statistical" category to which people could be sociologically allocated on the basis of their market situation. While people could, of course, be conscious of belonging to a particular economic class, Weber argued that this was not assured; just because, as sociologists, we can objectively allocate people to a particular category doesn't mean that:

- a. People accept that they belong to that category.

For example, someone who can be classified as "working class" on the basis of their "objective market position" as a road sweeper may (subjectively) believe themselves to be middle class - and this will have important social consequences for their social behaviour.

- b. People placed into the same objective category necessarily think and act in similar ways.

One major problem for Marxists is the fact that class is such a central theoretical concept in their analysis. Class is more than just a "statistical category"; it is the expression of a whole set of norms, values, beliefs, interests and so forth. In this respect, to (over)simplify the situation, each class in capitalist society has its own set of class interests - the proletariat's interests involve taking-over the means of production and holding them "in common", while the interests of the bourgeoisie are basically to prevent the proletariat doing just that.

Whereas the ruling class recognize their basic class interests, a problem arises when the proletariat do not seem to recognize their class interests - when, in effect, they show no overwhelming desire to overthrow the bourgeoisie. For Marxists, the problem here is how to explain why something has not happened in the way that it should be happening / should have happened. In short, based upon the assumption that the proletariat should see it to be in their interests to throw off their exploitation by the bourgeoisie, Marxists have to explain why the proletariat have not behaved as predicted - and to do this they have employed a variety of concepts (false consciousness, ideological indoctrination and so forth) to try to explain the shortfall between prediction and reality.

According to Weber, on the other hand, we must avoid the trap of assuming that, because people can be objectively assigned a particular class their "failure" to act in ways that further their "objective class interests" have to be explained in terms of such concepts as "false consciousness" or "ideological distortions" introduced through a ruling class control of various agencies of socialization (education, mass media, etc.). People may appear to act in ways that are not in their interests for a variety of reasons and we can only understand these reasons by looking at the (subjective) dimensions of status and party.

2. The concepts of status and party add a subjective dimension to social stratification, in terms of the fact that they allow Weber to theorize an element of conscious social organization that is related to - but also separate from - economic class. In this respect, we can see the basis for some of the theoretical confusion that tends to surround the pigeon-holing of Weber, in the sense that his form of "conflict structuralism" includes reference not simply to social structures but also to the subjective consciousness of individual social actors. This does not, by any stretch of the imagination place Weber in the "Interactionist" category - but it does tend to make him slightly unique (although even Talcott Parsons - usually considered to be a prime structuralist writer - has attempted to theorize the relationship between social structure and social action in ways that would not be considered too dissimilar to Weber's form of analysis. This again highlights the "pigeon-holing" problem of a "perspective approach" to sociology...).

Thus far we can conclude that Marx and Weber can be considered to "agree to disagree" over the relative importance of the concepts of class, status and power. However, when we look now at the way in which these concepts can be applied to an understanding of social stratification it becomes evident that wide differences appear in relation to such ideas as:

- a. How social class can be defined.
- b. The social significance of class.
- c. Social stratification based upon concepts like age, gender and ethnicity.

As we have seen, Weber defined social class as any group of people who share a similar position in an economic market. In this respect, "class position" is equated with "market position" and the latter can be defined as a combination of two ideas:

1. The ownership of property (such as land, factories and so forth).
2. Position in the labour market.

In this situation it is possible, in Weberian terms, to define four basic social classes that result from a combination of the above two social attributes - each position having positive and negative features in the following terms:

1. Ownership of property:

- a. Large property owners (for example, landed gentry, owners of large companies).
- b. Small property owners (for example, small shopkeepers).

Each group scores positively on the basis of property ownership and negatively on the basis of position in the labour market (since they do not sell their labour to others).

2. Position in labour market:

- a. High occupational positions (for example, white collar professional workers).
- b. Lower occupational positions (for example, manual workers).

Each group scores negatively on the basis of property ownership (since they do not own property in the same way as the two groups noted above) and positively on the basis of position in the labour market.

In terms of a classification system, this gives us four classes ranked in descending order of importance:

Class 1: A Propertied Class (Upper Class).

Class 2: White Collar Professionals (Upper Middle Class).

Class 3: Petty Bourgeoisie (Lower Middle Class).

Class 4: Working Class (Lower Class).

In Weber's classification:

A propertied class is placed at the top because of their economic power, social status and political influence.

A "professional class" was placed next because of their high position in the labour market and ownership of lesser forms of property (stocks and shares, for example), in addition to their relatively high social status and some political influence.

A petty bourgeoisie was placed third because of their less property ownership, lesser social status and lesser ability to exert political influence.

Finally comes the working class, so placed because of their relative lack of property ownership and lower position in the labour market, their low social status and lack of political influence.

Using the attributes of property ownership and labour market position, Weber was able to theorize convincingly a "middle class" (consisting of White Collar professionals and a petty bourgeoisie) in a way that Marx - and various Marxists - using mainly the dimension of "relationship to the means of production", could not. We can see why it is difficult for Marxists to theorize the existence of a "middle class" by looking briefly at the attempts of Marxist writers such as Poulantzas ("Classes In Contemporary Capitalism", 1975) and E.O.Wright ("Class, Crisis and the State", 1978) to do just this...

Marxism and the Middle Class...

The efforts of such writers have been directed towards showing that the "middle class" is different to both the upper and working class on the basis of a distinction between "ownership" and "control" - in basic terms, in modern industrial societies businesses are no-longer run on a day-to-day basis by their owners, but by a "new" class; a class that controls how a business is run, without actually owning it. The distinction is a bit like that between the proprietor and the editor of a newspaper, whereby the latter runs the paper on a daily basis without ever owning it.

However, clear problems emerge from this type of argument:

1. Firstly, as many Marxists have demonstrated, the "controllers" of companies often have an ownership stake in the company they manage (making the distinction between ownership and control less clear).
2. Secondly, the concept of "middle class" is too broad, since it encompasses people such as company directors, lawyers, accountants, clerks and the like - people who may have very little in common. Using the distinction would mean that we would have to define many classes within the "middle class".

Pahl talked about a "new petty bourgeoisie" that was defined as those people:

- a. Employed in some form of mental labour (the "intelligentsia").
- b. Having some form of non-productive "supervisory" role.
- c. Not directly employed in the productive process but facilitating that process (accountants, clerks, etc).

Once again, however, the problem is that this category catches too many people who have very little in common. For example:

The (non-shareholding) Managing Director of a company is, on the above basis, middle class - but so is the person who sweeps the floor of the office in which the MD works...

Erik Olin Wright argues that the middle class has a "contradictory class position" - middle class professionals, for example, may be involved in the running of a business in the "absence" of its owner, yet their status is "only" that of an employee. Again, while this is clearly possible, it does not seem a very illuminating path to travel since it tells us very little about the nature and membership of this class.

In addition to the "theoretical problem" of a middle class, Marxists generally have problems explaining the nature of age, gender and ethnic group stratification - these forms of social stratification tending to be "downgraded" in significance as being secondary rather than primary forms of social stratification. For Weber, on the other hand, the position of such groups is rather easier to explain by using the concepts of status, power and class situation.

In this respect, Weber argues that an important dimension of social stratification is the status group - people who share a similar level of social status and, therefore, a similar status position in society. This may prove to be an important element in an individual's awareness of belonging to a coherent social grouping. The concept of status group is interesting for a couple of reasons:

1. It shows how people can not only have a "common economic situation" (their objective position in a system of stratification, for example) but also, most importantly, why people see themselves as having common interests (their subjective perception of stratification).

2. Status that derives from property ownership, occupational situation and so forth encourages the development of an awareness in the individual of both their objective and subjective position in a system of stratification.

For example, in terms of explanations of gender inequality and stratification, it is possible to look at the position of women in society in terms of both their position in the labour market and their status as women - each affects the other in some way.

However, as you might have come to expect by now, this form of analysis does have its problems:

1. How can we define and, most importantly operationalise (that is, measure) the concept of status?
2. How do people allocate social status to each other?
3. Why do the wealthy enjoy greater social status than the non-wealthy - and why?
4. Is social status a general social concept (that is, one that is applied to an understanding of peoples' position in society as a whole), or can it only be applied to very specific social settings (such as the status relationship between fairly closely-related groups)?

The above notwithstanding, the concept of "status groups" does help us to explain a very important variant of social stratification, namely "caste systems". In Weberian terms, castes are extreme forms of status - rather than class - groups whose membership is closed. That is, people are included and excluded from membership of particular castes on the basis of occupational tradition.

In addition, as we have seen in relation to deviance and social control, "status labels" can frequently cut across all other social divisions - ethnicity, gender and age being obvious cases in point, while labels such as "criminal", "insane" and the like are also very important "master status labels" in this context.

Criticisms...

Weber's multi-dimensional approach to the concept of social stratification has its strengths (as I trust we have seen), but it also has some potential weaknesses that we can now briefly discuss.

1. As Marxists have argued, economic power (especially in advanced industrial societies) appears to be the most important - or primary - dimension to social stratification. Status considerations may be very important within broad class groupings, but class itself is arguably the most important dimension of stratification. For example:

The concept of women, as a status group, having a great deal in common also obscures the fact that women, considered in class terms, many not have very much in common in terms of their life chances, experiences and so forth. A working class woman, for example, may only have the biological fact of her sex in common with an upper class woman.

2. Weber's pluralistic approach to social stratification (which involves several competing and conflicting groups) makes it very difficult to specify stratified social groups in society. The boundaries between various groups are almost impossible to specify (where does one group begin and another group end, for example?) and we tend to end-up, empirically, with a stratification system that is highly fragmented (that is, split-up into numerous small groups) and almost impossible to classify coherently.

3. There is an uneasy relationship between the concepts of objective and subjective class positions; while Weber may offer a more-convincing explanation of the difference between the two concepts, we have no real way of telling which is considered most important, nor why.

4. Economic differences in modern societies are huge and people, especially in their political behaviour, do at various times clearly identify with broad class groupings rather than narrow status groups. Given the emphasis on status and a fragmented view of the class structure, it is difficult to understand why this should be the case.

5. The argument that a "pluralistic power balance" between competing interest groups in society may be more illusory than real, since it is evident that some groups in society are so powerful that any meaningful sense of "competition" appears redundant.

6. Finally, with reference once again to the idea that Weber's analysis of stratification tends to produce a picture of a highly fragmented class structure, there is no way of knowing where this fragmentation could stop - in effect, the level of fragmentation appears to depend more upon the way in which a stratification system is defined than to anything more useful. Ultimately, in this respect, it is possible to visualize a "subjective / objective" stratification system in which each individual occupies a unique class, status and power position...