

Explain and critically  
assess weber's  
conception of power



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## Introduction

This essay explains and critically assesses Max Weber's conception of power. In the current study Weber is identified as manifesting both the Hobbesian and Machiavellian proto-realist perspectives: in conceptualising power as fundamentally connected to implicit threat and coercive force. Hence the current study outlines the ways in which Weber's notions of power hinge largely on the state's coercive capabilities, examining various forms of social, political, and cultural violence therein. Further, the current study draws comparisons between Weber and Marx, looking at the similarities and distinction between the two thinkers: concluding that Weber has a different and more complex understanding of class divisions and power struggles than Marx did.

### The Many Faces of Power: Legitimate Domination and Willing Subjugation

The renowned German sociologist Max Weber came to prominence in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a time in which the politico-economic theories of his precursor Karl Marx were beginning to take hold in Europe; when the "the spectre of Communism", as the Communist Manifesto termed it, was "haunting" the continent (Marx and Engels, 2012, p. 33). Moreover, this was a time of great social and political transformation in the West, whereupon the overall character of European polities had been drastically altered by waves of democratic fervour and revolutionary violence. The Revolutions of 1848, for instance, represented the single most concentrated outcrop of political upheaval in the history of European politics. "The 1848 revolutions", says Micheline R. Ishay, "were a watershed. In the most

industrialized countries, they broke the liberal-radical republican alliance against legitimist regimes and catalysed the formation of the most radical human rights perspectives of the century" (2008, p. 121). In a very significant sense, said revolutions were a movement against the established power structures of the era. This was a time of great liberal reform and technological change; the social and political apparatuses by which international relations were hitherto understood were being fundamentally transformed - as were theoretical conceptions of power.

Although the 1848 Revolutions were mostly checked and curbed within a year of their outbreak, the underlying sentiment and intellectual kindling had not been extinguished. Instead, it fomented in various forms: one of which would lead eventually to the rise of Communism in the early twentieth century. With such conspicuous changes in the makeup of political relations during the nineteenth century, there came concurrent shifts in critical perspectives on how and why such changes occurred. Marx had upheld a perspective that prioritised historical materialism and the fundamental primacy of class struggle as defining political relations. Power, for Marx, concerned the power of those capitalist elites who owned the means of production to exploit the workers whose labour literally made production happen. Marx's political philosophy was extremely widespread, known even to those who abjured it. For Marx, power also has much to do with class divisions: particularly between those who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and the workers, or proletariat, who exchange their labour value for wages. Power is thus manifested in the oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie - for whom the social and political structures are geared to

preserve the status quo, keeping the workers in a state of social, economic, and political subordination. Marx's understanding of power, then, is concerned with large scale social and historical forces, particularly as they relate to material and industrial relations in determining power and overall socio-political mechanics.

Weber, on the other hand, developed an approach that varied from the Marxian mould, stepping away from the perceived predominance of grand overarching forces in determining social and political relations. As a result, Weber also moved away from Marx's theory of the strict bourgeoisie/proletariat duality as being the dominant paradigm in political economy. The latter class division was, for Marx, the principle animus for change in capitalist societies. As a consequence, Marx's conception of power cannot be separated from his overall understanding of the relationship between capitalists and workers. For Weber, socio-economic divisions, and their relations to power, are far more complex than those posited by Marx. Weber understood class distinctions as deriving from more than just an inequality in property relations; instead, Weber posited that it was the unequal distribution of power that resulted in social dividing lines. Power for Weber was, again, more intricate and multifaceted than the kind Marx had proposed. Weber states that power is "the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action" (1968, p. 926). Already we can see that Weber's rendition of power is more abstract and open to interpretation than that of Marx. Further, Weber's conception of power is similar to modern critical formulations of same; where "power", at

its most fundamental, " entails the capacity of one actor to make another actor do something which they would not otherwise do" (Haugaard, 2004, p. 304). Most importantly, Weber's definition is very broad; it allows for application in a number of contexts: social, economic, political, cultural, familial, sexual, interpersonal, and many others.

### Violence and Coercion: the Centrality of Force in Power Relations

Weber's conception of power is " inextricably connected to violence and coercion" (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 39). Such violence is articulated through various social structures, from the microcosm of the family to the macrocosm of the state. Weber consequently sees " subjects as being on the receiving end of structures of power" (Whimster and Lash, 2006, p. 22). The interactions between these discrete structures of power allow for varying degrees of control over the exercise of violence: where certain individuals or groups have access to or are denied the means to exert their will. For Weber, such means obtain to ideas of legitimacy. Hence, for Weber, the question of power relate to issues about: " who controls the means of violence; who enjoys a monopoly over economic resources; who controls the legitimate means of political power; and finally who has control over symbolic force" (Turner, 2002, p. 215). Social action is thus enabled by control of distinct fields of power. The more such fields of power can be channelled and consolidated, the more power that obtains. This can be seen very clearly, for example, in the state's exclusive mandate on legal violence (via armed forces, police, prisons, and so forth). Hence Weber defines the state as " that agency within society which possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence" (cited in Wanek, 2013, p. 12). Accordingly, in Weber's view, the implicit <https://assignbuster.com/explain-and-critically-assess-webers-conception-of-power/>

threat of violence perpetually underwrites the state's authority. Thus Weber's position anticipates Mao Zedong's famous declaration that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (cited in Wardlaw, 1989, p. 43).

For Weber, then, coercive force is fundamental to power. Put simply, coercion equates to influence; and influence is power. National political power is therefore structured on implied coercive mechanisms. Hence Weber avers that "if no social institutions existed that knew the use of violence, then the 'state' would be eliminated" (cited in Wagner, 2002, p. 120). So conceived, the state is in itself a form of coercive apparatus. Because the state monopolises legal violence, the state is the primary source of power as such. This means access to power is achieved via access to and control over the mechanisms of state. Power is thus manifested in the specific structures on which the social order is based. However, Weber does not believe that power is constituted in coercive force exclusively. Instead, a dynamic of obedience obtains between the ruling class and those ruled: in which the latter group willingly obey their political leaders. Here, Weber's conception of power becomes more complex, delineating ideas of legitimate domination. As Weber perceives it, social conformity, or, as he puts it, "performance of the command", may "have been motivated by the ruled's own conviction of its propriety, or by his sense of duty, or by fear, or by 'dull' custom, or by a desire to obtain some benefit for himself" (1968, p. 947). The dominated thus inadvertently cooperate in their domination.

Hence we can see that Weber's conceptualisation of power echoes a

Hobbesian perspective, which stresses a central causality between a "<https://assignbuster.com/explain-and-critically-assess-webers-conception-of-power/>

sovereign" power and popular subjugation (Sreedhar, 2010, p. 33).

Furthermore, state power and interest are related to a conflictual paradigm where self-interest and the will to domination are taken as a given. Weber thus articulates a realist perspective. In addition, Weber's notion of legitimate domination somewhat chimes with Gramscian hegemony, in that power is constituted and reconstituted in various complex sites, working overall to legitimise the status quo. As a result of this, Weber is distinct from Marx in two very important ways: firstly, he sees power as more abstract, subtle, and complex than Marx does; secondly, he sees power as deriving from many different types of social phenomena - not just class struggle. Following this logic, Weber also applies the same extended complexity to the concept of the origins of power. Thus, for Weber, power comes from "three different sources": "class (economic power), status (social power), and parties (political power)" (Levine, 2006, p. 6). As we can see, then, Weber's conception of power is based on coercion, force, domination, social structures, and a quasi-hegemonic socio-political structure that promotes and induces willing subjugation in the populace.

Weber's ideas are clearly more reflective of realist political theory than of Marxian idealism, which posits utopic notions of eventual global socialist harmony. This is not to say that Weber wholesale rejects the Marxian position, he does not; rather, he accommodates Marx's economic arguments in his overall politico-economic model. Further, he expands upon and problematises them. As one would therefore expect, much like his conception of power, Weber's conception of class is far more nuanced and open to interpretation than that of Marx. For Weber, class pertains to the

numerous potential relations that may obtain in a given economic market. In particular, this relates to relationships that arise between an individual, or a group, as concerns a given market. This means that different kinds of economic distinctions will give rise to specific forms of class relation – not just a worker/capitalist polarity. Weber sees class as a social concept that encompasses numerous iterations within an overall economic purview. Such iterations include professionals, landowners, bankers, financiers, and many others (Hamilton, 1991, p. 182). In sum, then, Weber recognises numerous different kinds of class distinctions, each with their own complex sets of power relations. This heterogeneity, in turn, adds complexity to the overall function of power in its specific fields and sites of operation.

For Weber, then, power relates to a multiform phenomenon. In treating of the economic dimensions of power, Weber observes that the “ typical chance for a supply of goods, external living conditions, and personal life experiences” are fundamentally determined by “ the amount and kind of power, or lack of such, to dispose of goods or skills” for the sake of “ income in a given economic order” (1968, p. 927). Hence Weber observes a clear causal continuum between economic and other kinds of power, where one can come to necessitate (or, at least, facilitate) the other. Where Weber significantly diverges from Marx is in his posited importance of the modes of power that function semi-independently of economic considerations.

Specifically, Weber places much emphasis on social status. “ For Weber, status groups are collectives of people with similar lifestyles, and they often overlap with economic class position” (Levine, 2006, p. 6). In other words, the socially powerful tend to be located in economically powerful cohorts; at



the same time, those without social power tend to be associated with non-economically powerful cohorts. This last assertion can seem very similar to the Marxian view, of the powerful bourgeoisie and non-powerful proletariat. However, the important distinction in Weber's position is that affinities are drawn more primarily from social, not economic, similarities. Put simply, for Weber, two individuals or groups with similar social lives but different economic statuses could cohere nonetheless; their social alignment supersedes their economic misalignment. The economic distinction is not, for Weber, as integrally conflictual as it is for Marx.

This is not to say the Weber does not see class as an important social factor; rather, it to say that, unlike Marx, Weber does not see class struggle as the defining characteristic of history and society. He does not therefore adopt Marx and Engel's famous assertion that "all history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (2012, p. 33). Hence, while Weber sees class as a significant variable in overall quality of life, in dictating one's opportunities for advancement, for the acquisition of power, he does not identify a corollary primacy in class as catalysing social action and historical change. Friction between social forces - as embodied by class - is not the central source of social tension. This has to do with Weber's complex and diverse view of class. Weber sees class as heterogeneous and thus not easily reducible to two opposing factions. Compared to Weber, Marx's views of power and class are overly reductive. Of the worker, Weber observes, his "interests" may "vary widely, according to whether he is constitutionally qualified for the task at hand to a high, to an average, or to a low degree", meaning, in consequence, that "societal or even of communal action" from "

a common class situation" is "by no means a universal phenomenon" (Weber, 1968, p. 929). In other words, the working class cannot simply be lumped together in a bloc group understood as sharing uniform priorities and ambitions. In many senses, that is, power moves beyond material and economic divisions; cannot be attributed to isolated causes and motivations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Weber's conception of power is much in keeping with that proffered by classical realists, where coercive force constitutes the primary hinge around which political power moves. By extension, other manifestations of power both derive legitimacy from, while at the same time reciprocally legitimating, the state: by functioning within its purview. Weber diverges from Marxian reductivism, rejecting the polarity of capitalist/worker class struggle and the primacy of historical materialism. Weber accordingly refutes Marx's position that common class identity is sufficient to galvanise a homogenous intellectual action; he thus identifies many more lines of division between various social groups. For Weber, power is deeply related to social structures; indeed, power is seen to body forth though social structures, thereby keeping the popular masses in place. Interestingly, the power invested in said structures works, also, to instil a sense of obedience in the public. The public therefore helps to perpetuate the status quo by conforming with, thus legitimating, the state's exercise of coercive force.

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