

Karl marx and max weber on social stratification

[Philosophy](#)



We cannot deny the existence of social structures or system by which people are categorized or ranked in a hierarchy. This people categorization is otherwise known as social stratification. It is a universal characteristic of society that persists over generations. It is a social structure by which social issues and organizational problems arise.

In a society, groups of people share a similar social status, and this is known as social class. Over the years, the importance and definition of membership in any social class evolve and change between societies. Societies have become all the more dynamic because of technological advances, industrialization, and now, globalization.

Contemporary societies stratify into a hierarchical system based on economic status, income or wealth, and this is known as socioeconomic class. In the past, societies have an upper class and a lower class. Those in the upper class are deemed to be the very wealthy and powerful, while those from the lower class are the poor and the weak.

Considering social changes and developments in the twentieth century, new groups called the middle class and working class in urban societies emerged. Members of the middle class are the educated, highly paid professionals like doctors, accountants, scientists, and lawyers. They nonetheless work for or render services for the upper class. Much like the working class, they receive their wages, only they earn above the minimum wage because of the market value of their professions and skills. Their market value increases as they increase their skills and competencies. They have the chance to increase their income and eventually move up the social ladder (Krieken, et al, 2001, p. 62).

Meanwhile, those who belong to the working class are the trades people, factory laborers, drivers, and similar workers who has some skills training, which they use to earn a living. Although they may be considered financially stable due to regular income, they still belong to the lower class for the reason that they earn only slightly above the minimum wage.

Other members of the lower class are the underemployed, unemployed, welfare beneficiaries, homeless, and everyone else who live below the poverty line. Due to lack of education and skills, their opportunities are simply limited (McGregor, 1997, p. 261).

Social stratification is already an intrinsic structure of any society, and if it has its benefits and function in a society, which some scholars believe, that is reward and merit for productivity. People are rewarded for their productive efforts and skills. When we speak of reward, it does not only mean economic reward. Remember that people are also rewarded with (social) honor and this is known as social status.

Karl Max and Max Weber were distinguished theorists whose works have become the basic but significant frameworks of sociology. Their concepts prove to be relevant until today. They have provided a rich reservoir of perspectives, which help contemporary social thinkers and learners, understand social stratification, classes and status groups. They both laid the groundwork for understanding social conflict and inequality in modern society such that whenever issues of social inequality arise, whether it is on the basis of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and other dimensions, all these are explored and studied in the context of sociological traditions derived from their works.

Karl Marx' Concept of Class

Karl Marx defined class in terms of the extent to which a person or social group has the capacity to control the means of production. Those of the same social class have a common relationship to the means of production. Marx believed that the base of inequality among individuals in modern societies is economy (Sanghara).

Marx believed that classes are constituted by the relationship of groupings of individuals to property ownership in the means of production. In this regard, a few own properties and capital while others do not, many work while only a few live off the fruits of those workers. Class societies have been built around a line of demarcation between two antagonistic classes, one dominant and the other subordinate (Giddens, 1971, p. 37).

Marx' view of social stratification stemmed from his observations of early industrialization in Europe during the late part of the 19th century. He saw the existence of two major classes -the ruling class (capitalists) and the working class, or otherwise known as the bourgeois and proletariat. The capitalists were viewed as such because of their ownership of the means of production, as well as the power this creates - economically and even politically (Krieken, et al, 2001, p. 55).

In a capitalist system, the ruling class, with their economic resources, lives from the productivity of the working class, and this is when social divisions and conflicts arise. Unlike in tribal, rural or simple societies where people live by hunting (or gathering), people can not be categorized differently, because no one has more than others do.

Marx believed that the conflict between the bourgeois (capitalists) who happen to control production, and the proletariat who actually produce the goods or render services in a society, on the basis of capitalism.

In capitalism, control over production evokes control over the laborers, and this set-up is likely to result in exploitation of workers by the capitalists. With the craving of capitalists themselves to compete with fellow capitalists, and the greediness for more material gains, Marx predicted that in a society where the capitalist system prevails, financial resources of the few but wealthy capitalists would flourish. At the same time, the income disparity between the poor and the rich would continue. Meanwhile, as capitalists continue to exploit workers, the workers would remain victims of economic crises.

The social classes that originated from the capitalist system that Marx knew during his time still holds true today, only, the bourgeois class has become fragmented over the last century due to the emergence of the so-called stockholders. Likewise, the proletariat has been changed significantly by the “white-collar revolution.” Decades ago, work involved mostly manual labor, or otherwise known as “blue-collar” occupations. “White-collar” occupations involve mostly mental or non-manual skills. However, the shared social structure of earning wages makes both proletariats during Marx’ time, and today’s educated but average office workers, a “working class.”

Today, workers’ conditions have significantly improved through the efforts of labor organizations, and, because of expanded legal rights and protection of workers. While exploitation of workers still happen, and a small proportion of powerful people control the vast majority of wealth in our society, Marx’

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perspectives will continue to prove valuable and significant in our understanding of social conflicts that arise from social stratification.

Max Weber's Social Stratification

Max Weber expressed a two-fold classification of social stratification, with social class, status groups as distinct concepts. He believed that, the economic order was of great importance in determining the precise position of different communities, but nonetheless, he did not discount the important role of religion, ideas, status, and bureaucracy (Hadden, 1997, p. 126).

Weber defined class as the disproportionate distribution of economic rewards, and the status group as the disproportionate distribution of social honor (Krieken, et al, 2001, p. 58). Class position is determined by one's market value. This market value is founded by education, talent, acquired skills and competencies. He had no notion of "surplus value," unlike Marx. Social class is simply an aggregate of people with similar work or professional opportunities, and their position would depend on the choices they made out of these opportunities.

Unlike social class, status groups have similar qualities like groups. They are influenced by how social honor is shared among the members of the group. Lifestyle is shared by those of the same social circle. Belonging to a status group may depend on kinship, education, and at the most extreme, through a caste system, which happens to be related to one's culture. In a caste system, status is determined not only by law and convention, but also by religious sanction (Gane, 2005, p. 211).

Contrary to Marx' perception, Weber believed that status is more influential than economic condition. He introduced the concept of status groups as an additional social category to define one's consumption pattern or lifestyle. If Marx focused on one's position in the production assembly, Weber believed that status groups are actually communities held together by common lifestyles and social esteem. Status groups share the same professions, views, as well as lifestyles. They do not just enjoy economic rewards, but social honor as well. With their professional achievement, comes social honor.

Weber was concerned with individuality and generality (Ritzer, p. 114). For instance, he recognized the individuality of people - their talents, skills and competencies and, that people have a good chance to further their career and improve their standard of living by increasing their market value through education.

Weber's theory on social mobility (or movement in the class structures) is more promising. Unlike Marx' idea of social class which imply that animosity between the bourgeois and proletariat will not end until the proletariat eventually overthrow the bourgeois.

However, Weber's concept of social mobility does not only mean an upward movement. The reverse may also happen and that is - moving down the social ladder. Moving up or down the social ladder will depend upon the life choices the person made, as well as opportunities he had. In this case, the middle class are the most predisposed as it is only an intermediary class. Just like how Marx argued, the middle class would be eventually absorbed into

both the upper and lower class, as this is not sufficiently different for it to survive (as a social class) in the long run.

Conclusion

Karl Marx and Max Weber were two important personalities whose theories led to our understanding of social stratification, class and status groups. Marx provided an elaborate and very systematic concept of capitalism and capitalist development, and its effect in society. While Weber held other factors were also relevant in determining the future of our society such as religion, culture, ideas, values, meaning, social and personal action.

Marx and Weber's perspectives amazingly still hold true in today's modern societies. In the "Communist Manifesto," Marx and Engels remarked that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Bottomore, 1983, p. 75). In any historical era, social classes were real and today, pressing economic conditions make social stratification and other structures all the more complex.

Despite the fact that many work even harder to achieve more economic reward, many cannot move up the social ladder. "The class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, become subsumed under it" (Giddens and Held, p. 20)

To be in the middle of the ladder, and stay there is such a long tedious struggle. Opportunities come, but sometimes, these elude them. In most modern societies in the world, many still live below the poverty line. But

those who are born in a wealthy or powerful family, knows just where they stand in the hierarchy system - and that is similar to that of their parents. Looking at how wealth is proportioned in today's society, and how richer populations possess and continue to increase their wealth, Marx was right. The trend of widening disparity in wealth and social class between the rich and the poor will continue, until we brace ourselves as a social group to make a conscious and consolidated effort of reducing this gap.

Weber believed, we can accomplish things which we do not even rationally or scientifically think we are capable of doing, "namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals" (Weber, 1968, p. 15). In other words, man has innate capabilities and the power to make significant change in himself and in the society where he belongs.

To illustrate his viewpoint and applying it in contemporary society - and it may already sound cliché, one way of reducing the gap between social classes is through education. Through education, we are able to set the social foundation for the next generations. It is the long route, but nonetheless, its impact has more lasting value.

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