
UNIT 4 WEBERIAN

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall discuss the view of the founding father of sociology, namely, Max Weber. He has made tremendous contributions for sociological thought. We will of course concentrate on only one aspect of their contribution - social stratification. After reading this unit you will understand:

- how classes emerge in society;
- the basis of class formation;
- role of classes in social stratification; and
- Similarities and differences between Marx and Weber on Classes.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Marx Weber (1864-1920) was another outstanding thinker. Like Marx he recognized the economic aspects of stratification but he differed with Marx on several of his basic propositions. While Marx focussed his attention on the toiling classes and looked at social development from their point of view, Weber stressed on the role of the propertied classes in social development. Thus Weber is often referred as the Bourgeois Marx. In this unit we shall discuss the views of Marx and Weber on stratification and then compare views of Marx and Weber. We will then discuss the significance in analysing class in understanding stratification systems.

Max Weber as mentioned in the beginning is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Sociology. He is also the originator of the most powerful alternative to the Marxist theory of society. We shall discuss his views on class and other forms of social stratification in this section.

Like Marx, Weber also believed that class was a basic form of stratification in society. He defined the term 'class' according to the Marxist criterion, namely, in relation to ownership of property. Property and lack of property, according to him, were the basic categories of all class situations. He went on to distinguish between two types of property-ownership and non-ownership of goods and services. Those who owned property offered goods while those not owning had only their labour power or skills to offer. Thus a factory owner can offer goods which were produced in the factory. His workers, on the other hand, can offer only their labour power in exchange of wages.

4.2.1 Class and Life – Chances

Another aspect of class that Weber stressed on was 'life-chances'. This term related to the opportunities an individual got during the various stages of his or her life. An individual born in a worker's family receives a particular type of education, which in turn equips him or her for specific jobs. The education will not be as expensive or as intense as the education of a child in an upper class family. The employment opportunities for both are different. Their different family backgrounds also make them part of different classes. The same pattern can be seen in social interaction and marriage. A person from a working class background will interact mostly with other members of his or her class whereas a person from the upper-middle class will have acquaintances mainly from his class. Thus Weber found that life-chances was an important aspect of class formation.

Box 4.02

While discussing life-chances Weber's emphasis was on the group or the community and not on the individual. He insisted that while determining class, we have to look at the life-chances of the collective and not of individuals within the collective. This is a very important aspect of class as a collective. It is possible that the life-chances of an individual may be different. For example the child of a-worker may be able to surpass his or her class barrier. He/ she may get a better education and get employment that is different from the opportunities available for his/her peers.

The son of an industrialist may become a worker because of his abilities or other circumstances. But these, Weber pointed out, were exceptions and not the rule. He pointed out that what was more important was the fact that the

life-chances or members of a class were similar. This is what gave permanence to that class as the next generation too joined the same class. Therefore the definition of life-chances, according to Weber, is sharing of economic and cultural goods which are available differently for different groups.

The life-chances of an individual were largely determined by the market situation. The son of a worker became a worker because this was the best occupation available to him given his background. The market situation becomes more important for the propertyless as they have to depend mainly on the production of services as they possess only their skills. They cannot market anything else for their existence. The property owners on the other hand can depend on the income they get from their productive property.

Hence for Weber class had two basic aspects. Firstly it was an objective category. It was determined by the control or lack of control over productive property of the members. Secondly, all members of a particular had similar life-chances, which in turn distinguished these members from others. The life-chances of individuals depended on their market situation in the case of those not owning productive property and on the ownership of productivity for those owning these.

Based on his definition, Weber identified four classes in capitalist society. These were: (a) Upper class that comprised those owning or controlling productive private property. This class was similar to the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) in Marx's analysis, (b) White-collar workers. This class included all those who were engaged in mental labour -managers, administrators, professionals, etc. (c) Petty bourgeoisie. These were the self-employed and they included shopkeepers, doctors lawyers, etc. (d) Manual workers. These people sold their physical labour in exchange for wages. The working class was included in this class. Weber thus divided society into four classes as opposed to Marx's two-class model. Hence though Weber found the basis of class formation was similar to that of Marx he differed with Marx on the types of classes in society.

4.2.2 Status

Like Marx, Weber also distinguished between class and class-consciousness. As discussed above, for Marx, class-consciousness was an important aspect of class. A class could articulate its interests if it was conscious of its existence as a special group. Weber too talked of class-consciousness but he did not think it as necessary for the existence of a class. Instead he looked for an alternative to class-consciousness and he found it in status. Weber noted that whereas an individual's class situation need not lead to his becoming class conscious, he was always conscious of his status.

Activity 1

Discuss with other students in the study centre what is meant by status. Do their conceptions fit in with Weber's view on status? Note down your findings.

According to Weber, classes were formed on the basis of economic relations. Status groups, he noted, were normally 'communities'. He defined status a position in society determined by social estimation of 'honour'. There were links between class and status but in many cases they were in opposition to each other. Class was associated with production of goods and services or in acquisition of the same. Status was determined by consumption. Thus status was associated with a life style where there were restrictions on social intercourse. Weber noted that the most rigid and well-defined status boundaries could be found in India's caste system. A Brahman may belong to the working class because it was the means of his livelihood, however he would always consider himself superior to a person from a lower caste even though the class situation of both may be the same. At the same time that Brahman worker may have greater interaction with other Brahmans belonging to classes higher than his. In our society we can see that inter-caste marriage is not tolerated even when both families are from the same class but they occupy different statuses in the caste hierarchy.

There in a stratified society, Weber found that property differences generated classes whereas prestige differences generated status grouping. There were the two main bases of social stratification.

4.2.3 Power

The third organizing principle of social stratification is power, Unlike status and wealth which can be clearly linked with group characteristics of rankmg hi societies, the principle of power is a relatively diffused attribute because it is not exclusive in character. It is always possible that a group with higher status in society or that which enjoys greater wealth, also exercises more power in society. Nevertheless, one could make a distinction between say, principle of privileges where as the latter tends to be based on the group's ability to use coercive means for other group's conformity with actions, values and beliefs determined by it. The concept of power as Max Weber has discussed in his treatment of social stratification rests on the fact that it endows the persons or groups which have power to impose their will on other groups by legitimate use of coercive method. In this sense, state offers us a good example of an institution which has maximum power. It has sovereign authority to impose its will on citizens of the society. When legitimacy of exercise of power, is widely accepted by groups, in other words, when it is institutionalized in society, power becomes authority. Authority as a concept could be defined as legitimate power. Power as a principle also enters into the notion of social stratification when its functions or its social ramifications

begin to be influenced by the political processes in society, and when state begins to take more active or direct role in influencing the principles of social stratification. A relevant example of this could be found in the policy of positive discrimination or reservation of jobs, political offices and entry into educational institutions in our country by the state in favour of castes and tribes now declared as 'scheduled' or as 'other backward classes'. Max Weber, in his treatment of power as an element in the formation of social stratification has rightly emphasised the significance of politics, political parties and their role in optimizing their access to power.

Activity 2

Discuss 'status' 'wealth' and 'power' with other students in the study centre. In which way are they related to one another? Put your findings down in your notebook.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Describe Weber's views on Classes and Life chances. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Outline some of the similarities and differences between Weber and Marx so far as their views on social stratification is concerned. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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4.4 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARX ANDWEBER

From the above discussions we can see that there are some similarities between the two thinkers on stratification. There are major differences as well. For Marx the basis of stratification was class. The formation of class was objective in the sense that a class was not formed because a group of

people got together and decided that they form a class. Its formation was because of the production relations that existed in a society. Therefore a person's position in the class structure was based on his position in the production relations. If he happened to own or control capital and he employed others, he was a capitalist. Those who did not own or control property belonged to the opposing class of worker.

Opposition of classes was an important aspect of Marx's analysis. It was through this opposition that social and economic change took place. The capitalists invent new ways to counteract workers. This could be new technology resulting in better production techniques or new laws preventing workers from becoming more powerful. The workers too in their struggle become more united. They tend to drop their internal differences when they realise that their main opponent is another class. This leads to greater unity among them. Thus for Marx, class and class-consciousness do not mean mere categories in society. They are fundamental for social development.

At one level, Weber accepts Marx's view on class. However he does so not to support Marx but to show how his analysis has weaknesses. He stresses that society cannot be divided into only two main classes. There are more classes that emerge due to the market situation and the type of work done. He therefore finds that there are four main classes in society. This in effect confuses the class relations. Thus Weber feels that neither class nor class-consciousness can explain stratification completely. He thus lays greater stress on status, whereas Marx lays stress on class-consciousness. Weber tries to show that class-consciousness is not an important aspect of social stratification. For him status groups are the basis. He finds that classes are static whereas status stretches across classes.

While comparing the two we must keep in mind that Weber was an opponent on Marx's views. He tried to provide alternatives to Marx. In this sense the two cannot be compared because Weber's work was not complimentary to that of Marx (just as Davis' approach to stratification was complementary to that of Parsons as we shall show in the next unit). It was primarily developed to oppose Marx. Thus despite some similarities, their works are basically different.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In the above unit we have discussed the view of the founder of sociology, Max Weber, on social stratification. He has view that has shaped and influenced human development.

Marx Weber stressed on the formation of classes. The basis of the class was similar to what Marx said but he also stressed that there were four classes instead of two. Weber's differences with Marx did not end there. He tried to show the inadequacy of class analysis as the main means of explaining social stratification. He asserted that status was more important than class. His

contention was that people were not as class-conscious as they were status conscious. Hence he felt that status was a better measure of social stratification, even though class was an objective category.

4.6 KEY WORDS

Class : According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same.

Class : According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same. According to Weber, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other through their ownership or control of production and who share similar life chances.

Class-consciousness : A class that is conscious of its distinguished position in the social hierarchy.

Status : Effective claim to social esteem. Weber tried to show that status cuts across class barriers.

4.7 FURTHER READINGS

T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel (eds.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writing in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, Penguin Books, 1963.

H.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Marx Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948.

4.8 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Weber defined class in relation to private property, but he distinguished between ownership of goods and ownership of skills. The factory owner could offer goods but his workers offer labour power in exchange of

wages. Further life chances for Weber meant the opportunities an individual got during various stages of his life. Education and family background affect life chances. The emphasis however has to be on the group and these can improve or deteriorate the position. Finally life chances of a class were similar to which there were some exceptions.

- 2) There are both similarities and differences between Marx and Weber regarding their views on social stratification. Thus opposition of classes based on ownership of means of production was basic to Marx's thought. The class and class consciousness are basic to social development for Weber. Society can not be divided into only two classes, and he finds four classes in society Weber lays greater stress on status whereas Marx emphasizes class consciousness. Thus despite the similarities that both scholars emphasized the importance of the class, their views were not really similar.



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