**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 30: Weber on Class, Status, and Party**

* Weber’s theory of social class was written between 1911-1920 and appears in Vol. 2 of *Economy and Society.*
* Contra Marx, he noted differences in the economic footing of social classes in early vs. current capitalist societies.
* Considerations:
  + Weber had 60 years of evidence to draw on that Marx, writing in the mid-19th century, did not;
  + He saw the fundamental division of society into distinct and separate social spheres;
  + Property was not the sole determinant of class structure, so he doubted class conflict was the inevitable outcome of economic forces;
  + He thought there had been fundamental changes in antagonism between social classes;
  + He outlined these changes in terms of 3 central adjustments in class, status, and party.

**Weber on Class:**

* Weber’s theory of class considers 3 distinct categories:

1. Class in relation to market situation;
2. Class in relation to different types of social action flowing from class interests; and
3. The formation of social classes in relation to historical types of class struggle.

* As for the *first* component: “A class is a number of people having in common a specific causal component in life chances …represented by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income under conditions of the market.”
* New is the concept of “life chances,” based on marketable skills. Also significant is the emphasis on the market – distinct from the political and legal spheres –imposing conditions on the realization of economic interests and incomes (i.e. class not solely determined by property).
* Weber went beyond Marx by positing to categories of social class:

1. Class determined by the ownership of usable property, which creates returns on investment/rental income;
2. Class determined by the kinds of skills/services which can be put up for sale on the market independent of property ownership (e.g. educational credentials, certificates, technical abilities).

* The shift evidenced by this latter category offsets Marx’s “naked possession” of the means of production.
* Turning to the *second* component, Weber considered the types of social action arising from class interests.
* Weber disagreed with Marx, who assumed historical class interests were structurally determined by the social relations of production, not personal motives or intentions.
* The factual determination of class interests is more ambiguous, with people’s actions likely to vary according to occupation/ the size of the group affected. This, along with variations in individual motives/inclinations makes mass class movements difficult.
* Weber felt action by a class against the class structure could occur in only 2 ways:

1. By “irrational protest” and mass uprising (e.g. in early societies where differences in life chances based on property were transparently unfair); or
2. By rational association leading to the formation of trade unions (e.g. what has happened in modern societies).

* Thus, Weber saw class interests not as an objectively determined aspect of a person’s relation to the means of production, but as the “average interests” of different people facing similar market conditions/life chances. This not only considers individual awareness/motives, it is more complex.
* Unlike earlier periods where gross inequities related to aristocratic property ownership exist, modern class structure reduces the potential for class conflict, particularly since it is supplemented by legal, political, and social enfranchisement.
* Turning to the *third* component, Weber further considers historical types of class struggle.
* Unlike Marx, who assumed that experiencing common conditions led to social cohesion among groups, Weber thought that classes and groups were not necessarily identical – except for times like the early period of industrial transition, where there was an immediate economic opponent. Weber felt this situation had passed.
* As well, Weber thought people have separate motives leading them to compete as autonomous individuals. Classes thus lose their group homogeneity to the extent they compete in various situations rather than act together.
* Unlike Marx, who claimed that class conflict/antagonisms/ contradictions would increase over time, Weber thought that classes themselves were changing. They had evolved from those of the past to ones engaging in rational dispute settlement in a more equal context.
* Unlike earlier times where propertyless classes struggled against “monopolies, pre-emption, and withholding of goods,” now there are legally structured methods and the market to resolve disputes.
* Taken together, the transition to the modern class situation alters class conflict in two key ways:

1. A shift from direct confrontations between property owners and workers to mediated wage disputes on the market; and
2. Conflicts between classes are resolved by legal means (e.g. legal collective bargaining rights of the worker) and legitimate avenues for political action (e.g. parties that absorb class struggle into the political sphere).

**Weber’s Concept of the Status Group:**

**The Separation of Status & Party from Class:**

* Like the other spheres of social life Weber emphasized in terms of independence and function (e.g. law, rationality, politics, religion), Weber saw status groups as distinct from class.
* Weber defined a status situation as “every component of life fate that is determined by a positive or negative estimation of honor.” Not determined by market/ acquisitive economic activity like class, status is a separate dimension of social stratification defined by lifestyle, habits of taste, and relative social esteem.
* Class is based in acquisition; status in consumption. Status groups claim to distribute social honor by pursuing patterns of consumption and lifestyle (e.g. going to the right schools, belonging to the right clubs, etc.)
* Insofar as status is separate from class, status groups abhor those who pretend to ascend to their level through mere acquisition (e.g. snobs looking down on “new money”).
* Status groups share a number of characteristics. They:

1. Evaluate social worth and bestow honor (e.g. being seen as “the right kind of people,” worthy of marrying into the

group/being invited to join the club);

(2) Segregate themselves from other status groups (e.g.

through lifestyle, social badges, tastes, even religious and

legal injunctions, such as in the caste system);

(3) Uphold patterns of consumption and canons of taste (e.g.

enjoying worthy/desirable activities/products vs. those

vulgar ones of the rabble. Sometimes this relates to

specialized functions);

(4) Monopolize status privileges (e.g. restrictions on items of

dress, participation in certain social rituals, possession of

insignia or preferential titles, or ability to control certain

entitlements or powers).

* Status operates on a dimension from positive to negative.
* Status groups, analytically distinct from the market based, competitive economic activities of social classes, have the capacity to form communities based on common values, characteristics, lifestyles, and interests.
* Finally, Weber turns to the *political* sphere. Unlike class (rooted in the market) and status (rooted in esteem), he sees political parties as oriented to the realm of power and the political order.
* Based on voluntary solicitation and adherence to group rules, these are oriented to the acquisition of power, via considering the electorate, and influencing people’s actions for political purposes.
* A key function in all of this is mitigation of inequities in the class structure as parties absorb elements of class struggle into themselves. Thus, the stratification of political parties tends to represent various social classes.