

Weberian Theory

The Shaping of Max Weber as a Scholar

Max Weber was born on April 21, 1864, in Germany. Like Karl Marx, Weber was also the founding fathers of social sciences,

particularly of sociology, in Germany and Europe. His father was a textile manufacturer, a lawyer, and a parliamentarian. His mother was a woman of culture and pity having humanitarian and religious values, which were not liked by his father. Weber had education in law and legal history. In his doctoral thesis *A Contribution to the History of Medieval Business Organizations* (1889), Weber studied the cost, risk or profit of an enterprise. After this, he started training at the German bench/or bar. At this point of time, he got acquainted with the social and political problems of agrarian society. He joined as an instructor in law at the University of Berlin. Weber also studied social, political and economic developments of Roman society.

Being a full-time lecturer, consultant to government agencies, and researcher, Weber carried a heavy load of work. In 1894, he became full professor of economics at Freiburg University, and in 1896, accepted a position at the University of Hiedelburg. At the age of 33 years, Weber fell ill and was forced to suspend his regular academic work. For four years he suffered from an acute state of exhaustion and anxiety. During this personal turmoil, for which his family ambience was largely responsible, he spent time in Rome. Weber was an omnivorous reader. He had interest in history, religious organizations and economic activities. In 1901, Weber resumed his academic work, but he could not have the earlier vigour and zeal. Till his death in 1920, at the age of fifty-six, Weber accepted several part-time and full-time responsibilities.

Weber's extraordinary scholarship and family life are a strange mix. Withdrawal and forceful participation had become inseparable parts of his life. His life was full of contradictions, partly because of a liberal, middle-class family background, and in that conflicting values of his father and mother. Weber saw the decline of liberalism in an emerging power state and the

threat to the individual in the bureaucratization of modern society. He became convinced that one could achieve one's goals only by power politics.

Weber belonged to a generation of universal scholars. The intellectual traditions and the accumulated scholarship of Germany, especially in history, the classics, psychology, theology, comparative literature, philology and philosophy, provided Weber a great incentive to establish his own scholarship. Weber argued against historical materialism unlike Marx. He called himself an "economic nationalist". We are, however, concerned here with Weber's intellectual orientations. Weber has published extensively on economy and society, capitalism, religion, formal organizations and bureaucracy, law, methodology of social sciences, power and leadership, typology of human action, etc.

Since Weber was born after Marx, he had advantage of reacting to the Marxist ideas and conceptualizations. He tried to "round out" Marx's economic materialism by a political and military materialism. "Weber looks for the disposition over weapons and over means of administration." He makes a clear and rational distinction between economic, social and political orders of society, and considers power as a key to all the domains of society.

Weber makes out a clear distinction between class, status and power. Power is the key to the Weberian theory of social stratification. Class is an economic category, a product of the "market situation". Status is determined by "honour". "Status groups" constitute the social order based on honour. The way in which "status honour" is distributed is important in the understanding of social stratification. Weber makes it clear that classes and status groups are not necessarily independent phenomena. His theory of "class, status and party" corresponds

with the three orders in society, namely, economic, social and political. However, the three orders are not identical or independent, one can be influenced by the other. Thus, striving for power is not always for economic prosperity. It may be for its own sake or for social honour. All power does not provide social honour, and power is not the only source of social honour. Thus, status is determined by the social honour one enjoys, and the latter is expressed through different "styles of life". After this quintessential introduction to the Weberian theory of social stratification, we may work on details based on his classical essay "Class, Status, Party".

Economically Determined Power and the Social Order

The structure of every legal order directly influences the distribution of power, economic or otherwise, within its respective community. This is true of all legal orders and not only that of the state. Weber writes: "In general, we understand by 'power' 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 action."

"Economically conditioned" power is not, of course, identical with "power" as such. On the contrary, the emergence of economic power may be the consequence of power existing on other grounds. Man does not strive for power only in order to enrich himself economically. Power, including economic power, may be valued "for its own sake".

Very frequently, the striving for power is also conditioned by the "social honour" it entails. Not all power, however, entails social honour. Mere economic power or naked money power is by no means a recognized basis of social honour. Nor is power the only basis of social honour. Indeed, social honour, or prestige, may even be the basis of political or economic power.

Power as well as honour may be guaranteed by the legal order, but normally it is not their primary source. The legal order is an additional source, and it cannot always serve them.

"Social order" is defined by the way in which social honour is distributed in a society. The social order and the economic order are related to the legal order. However, the two are not identical. The way in which economic goods and services are distributed and used determines the economic order. The social order is determined by the economic order to a high degree and in turn reacts upon it. Thus, "classes", "status groups" and "parties" are phenomena of the distribution of power within a community.

Determination of Class Situation by Market Situation

Classes are not communities. They merely represent possible and frequent communal (collective/communitarian) action. According to Weber, we may speak of class when:

1. a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances;
2. in so far as, this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income; and
3. further, it is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets.

These three points refer to a "class situation". It implies the following points:

1. The typical chance for supply of goods.
2. External living conditions.
3. Personal life experiences.

Further, this chance is determined by the amount and the kind of power or lack of such, to dispose of goods or skills for the sake of income in a given economic order.

Thus, "the term 'class' refers to any group of people that is found in the same class situation". Competition eliminates some and patronizes others. Monopoly occurs either due to absence or weak competition or when the rival is ousted from competition.

"Property" and "lack of property" are, therefore, the basic categories of all class situations. Price wars and competitive struggles exhibit both. The kind of property and the kind of services further differentiate class situations, for example, in terms of class of *rentiers* and class of *entrepreneurs*, etc. The kind of chance in the market is the decisive factor in determining class position of a given actor. In fact, the "class situation" is ultimately the "market situation". But "possession" could be a decisive factor initially. The *creditor-debtor relation* becomes the basis of class situations. Monopoly and plutocracy (rich class government) emerge from class struggles. "Slaves" are a status group.

Communal Action Flowing from Class Interest

Though "class" is created by economic interest involving "market", yet the concept of "class interest" is ambiguous. Because an individual's ability may be *high, average* and low to qualify for an action. And then "trade union" also may come in affecting the "class situation". Such a situation is of communal action.

Communal action refers to that action which is oriented to the feeling of the actors that they belong together. *Social action*,

on the other hand, is oriented to a rationally motivated adjustment of interests. The rise of societal or even of communal action from a common class situation is by no means a universal phenomenon. The class situation may be restricted to in its effects to the generation of essentially similar reactions of "mass actions". Amorphous communal action may also emerge – murmuring on a given issue, or moral disapproval, or "slow down". The class situation implies:

1. the given distribution of property, and
2. the structure of the concrete recognizable economic order to ascertain a class situation. These make a class situation transparent.

Types of Class Struggle

A class in itself does not entail a community. Nevertheless, class situations emerge only on the basis of communalization (mobilization for common economic interests). The labour market and the capitalist enterprise determine the class situation of the worker and the entrepreneurs. Thus, the communal action is not basically action between members of the identical class. The existence of a capitalist enterprise is pre-conditioned by a specific kind of "legal order". Each kind of class situation rests upon the *power of property*. "Status groups" hinder the strict carrying of the sheer market principle. The examples of class struggle are: class struggles by peasants, artisans, etc., in ancient times; and today competitive struggles, price wars, etc.

Status Honour

According to Weber, in contrast to classes, *status groups* are normally communities, generally of an amorphous kind. Like a

"class situation", there is a "status situation", characterizing social estimation of honour, shared by a plurality. It may be knit to a class situation and vice versa. But status honour need not necessarily be linked with a class situation. It normally stands in sharp opposition to the pretensions of sheer property. Both propertied and propertyless people can belong to the same status group, and frequently they do with very tangible consequences. In the long run, such an equality may run quite precarious.

Guarantees of Status Stratification

Status honour is normally expressed by a specific style of life. Linked with this are restrictions on social intercourse, which is not subservient to economic status. *Status circle* is evident through marriages. Visits to streets, neighbourhoods, groups, etc., are examples of encircling of status groups. Further, Weber observes that the development of status is essentially a question of stratification resting upon usurpation. Such usurpation is the normal origin of almost all status honour. Stability of a system of status stratification comes from legally sanctioned social order.

Weber cites example of "caste" as a status group. Status distinctions are guaranteed not merely by conventions and laws, but also by *rituals*. Castes are status groups, and there is a combination of *ideal* and *material* factors in caste. Each caste has a style of life of its own. Weber says that the decisive role of a "style of life" in "status honour" means that status groups are the specific bearers of all "conventions". "Stylization" of life originates from status groups.

"Classes" are stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods as represented by special "styles of life". An

"occupational group" is also a status group. For example, Brahmins are a status group as they perform priestly functions. However, technological change and economic transformation threaten stratification by status pushing the class situation into the foreground.

Power (Parties)

"Classes" are found in economic order, "status groups" are seen in the sphere of the distribution of honour, and these two influence each other, and also the legal order, and are influenced by it. But "parties" live in a house of power. Thus, Weber asserts autonomy and interdependence of class, status and power.

Action by "parties" is oriented toward acquisition of social "power", that is to say, toward influencing a communal action, no matter what its contents may be. In principle, "parties" may exist in a social club, as well as in a "state". The communal actions of "parties" always mean a *socialization*. They are directed to a goal. A goal may be cause of action. It may also be due to a personal reason. "Parties" are thus possible within communities.

"Class situation"/"status situation" may determine "parties". But parties may not be either "classes" or "status groups". They are partly *class parties* and partly *status parties*. But sometimes they are neither. They have staff, rules of the game. "Parties" may represent ephemeral or enduring structures. Means of attaining power vary from naked violence to canvassing for votes with money, social influence, the force of speech, suggestion, clumsy hoax, etc. Parties differ in terms of the nature of communal action. They also differ based on the community stratification by status or by classes. They vary according to the structure of domination within the

community. History of parties can be seen vis-à-vis history of society.

H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills observe that much of Weber's method is informed by a skilful application of Marx's historical method. Weber used this method as a "heuristic principle". Weber was not, however, in favour of a view of world history or a monocausal theory. He was against reducing the multiplicity of casual factors to a single-factor theorem. He was not for reductionism. Weber's analysis of power and political structures closely parallels the Marxian approach to class and economic structures. Marx is less careful in distinguishing between economic power and political power. Weber, as a liberal, makes these spheres clearly distinct: "economic", "economically determined" and "economically relevant".

Weber emphasizes on the struggle for the means of "political rule". State enjoys monopoly of power. Like Marx, Weber brings ideological phenomena into some correlation with the material interests of economic and political orders. Weber has a keen eye for "rationalizations", reflected in his concept of "ideal type", action, bureaucracy, capitalism, etc. Weber talks of both "interests" and "ideologies" with equal emphasis. For Weber, modern capitalism is not irrational, it is very embodiment of rationality.

Bourdieu on "Class"

Pierre Bourdieu has published on peasants, art, unemployment, schooling, law, science, literature, kinship, classes, religion, politics, sports, language, housing, intellectuals, etc., and used ethnographic accounts, statistical models, abstract metatheoretical and philosophical arguments. Here, we would limit our observation to Bourdieu's concepts of "capital" and

"class". According to Bourdieu, a given society can be seen by the distribution of different kinds of resource or "capital". Three different forms of capital are: (1) economic capital (material wealth – money, stocks and shares, property, etc.); (2) cultural capital (knowledge, skills, cultural acquisitions); and (3) symbolic capital (accumulated prestige and honour). Such a classification has resemblance with Weber's formulation of economic, social and legal/political orders or to his idea of "class, status and party". We also find that Bourdieu has modified and expanded the concept of capital as proposed by Marx.

Bourdieu relates social space and the genesis of classes. He points out that in the Marxist theory the "theoretical class" cannot be treated as a "real class". A real class is an effectively mobilized group. Bourdieu talks of the social field, he does not grant a multidimensional space to the economic field alone, to the reductions of economic production. According to Bourdieu, symbolic struggles and the very representation of the social world, and in particular *hierarchy* within each of the fields and between different fields, cannot be overlooked. "Space of positions", in a formal sense, is described by Bourdieu as "class on paper", having a theoretical existence. It is really not a class, an actual class, in the sense of becoming a group, a group mobilized for struggle; at most one could say that it is a probable class. It is a nominalist relativism. With this, one looks for classes which can be carved out of the social space as real groups, practical groups, families, clubs, associations, political outfits, etc. A space of relations in reality, an alliance of agents of distances among these constitute really or nominally a class. About Marx's distinction between "class in itself" and "class for itself", Bourdieu comments that nothing is said about a "group in struggle", as a personalized collective, a historical agent setting its own aims, arising from the objective economic conditions.

Toeing Weber's theory, in a broad sense, Bourdieu states that political phenomena are not just a manifestation of socio-economic processes or of relations and oppositions between classes. The world is not a one-dimensional space. In the multidimensional social field(s), individuals occupy positions determined by the quantities of different types of capital they possess. Weber also thought of it in this manner. There are "homologies", but not necessarily always. But fields, positions, agents based construction is essential. As such, according to Bourdieu, Marxist analysis tends to confuse theoretical classes with real social groups. Bourdieu does not define classes in terms of the ownership or non-ownership of means of production. For Bourdieu, classes are sets of agents who occupy similar positions in the social space and hence possess similar kinds and similar quantities of capital, similar life chances, similar dispositions, etc. These classes are "theoretical constructs", not identical with real social groups, but help in the observation of social groups, sets of agents in reality.

Weber's Impact on Indian Studies

Weber's theory of social stratification has influenced several scholars, including Andre Beteille, Anil Bhatt, P.C. Aggarwal, K.L. Sharma, etc. Caste was taken as a singular institution of social ranking by M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont and several others in the fifties and sixties. Caste was treated as coterminous with entire gamut of social relations, and thought it to be an all-inclusive basis of social stratification. As a reaction to this approach, multidimensional character of social stratification was emphasized. Class and power along with caste (status) were considered as economic and political dimensions

of social inequality and hierarchy. Some scholars looked at caste from a class point of view.

In my own study of six villages in Rajasthan, both structural and cultural perspectives were applied to analyse the multidimensional nature of social stratification, mobility and change. Caste, class, caste and class consciousness, power structure, value orientations were taken as focal points to examine the relevance of "caste model" of Indian society. Andre Beteille, following Weber's theory of "class, status and party", makes a distinction between caste, class and power in his study of a village in Tamil Nadu. He observes a perceptible "differentiation of institutional structures" and an absence of "summation of statuses" could be found due to the factors and forces which were noticed in the village. In the same vein, Anil Bhatt states that a study of caste, class and politics provides a comparative analysis of social stratification. P.C. Aggarwal's study of caste, religion and power also falls in the category of multidimensional and comparative framework.

Weber's theory of social stratification cannot be taken away from Weber's overall approach to society, economy, state, religion, etc. Weber tried to synthesize rationalism, subjectivity and objectification in his method of understanding (*verstehen*). Individual, organization and group occupied their respective space in Weber's study of human society. Weber meticulously linked theory, method and data, which the Indian followers of Weber have not been able to do as scientifically as he did.