Wealth, Power, and Inequality

ChangHwan Kim

KU

Week 3
1864–1920

While Marx articulated a theory of social stratification based strictly on individuals relationships to the means of production, Weber distinguished between class and status.

Webers views are an example of the “subjectivist” approach (i.e., anti-positivism)

According to Weber, social reality is infinitely complex and too vastly complicated for the human mind to fully comprehend. Although the real world does indeed exist out there, the way in which we perceive reality is very much affected by the concepts that we use to observe it
Max Weber: Methods

- For Weber, there is no such thing as a presupposition-less social science.
- Sociology is launched and structured in the context of the researcher's moral values:
  1. the selection of the topic of study reflects the values, interests, presuppositions or cultural assumptions of the researcher.
  2. the concepts that we choose to use in our study of some topic also reflect the values, interests and presuppositions of the researcher.
Max Weber: Methods

- Sociology should try to provide an “analytical ordering of empirical reality” or a coherent, analytical, and relatively concise way of looking at the social world that we find to be somehow explanatory for social science or useful for public policy.

- To do so we need to be clear about what our terms and concepts mean (e.g., what is meant by “capitalism,” “socialism,” or “Neo-liberalism”)

- Weber’s writings are full of long definitions of many various concepts, but no broad or general theories.
Max Weber: Methods

- For Weber, concepts and the world out there are strikingly separated.
- "General laws" are a means to an end and are not themselves the end or primary objective of social science; "general laws" don’t capture the complexity of individual events which are often set in the context of a specific historical era and culture that may never again be exactly repeated.
- Weber’s research interests were often historical: why did the scientific revolution occur in Western Europe? Other cultures earlier had made various technological achievements (e.g., China and the Middle East).
- Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism argues that culture affected economic development in the West; the religious ideas of Calvinism were one important factor that facilitated the breakthrough to the creation of the scientific revolution and then the industrial revolution.
Max Weber: Methods

- **fact/value distinction**: facts need to be distinguished from values; facts and values are different and separate.
- Knowledge of facts may help us to make more informed judgments about relevant ethical issues, but values are not simply derivative of facts (e.g., pro-life versus pro-choice).
- Sociology can establish what the facts are but it cannot tell us what are our values should be.
Max Weber: Methods

- Marx generally followed the tradition of 18th century Enlightenment philosophers for whom truth leads to virtue which leads to happiness.
- They believed that as we advance our factual knowledge of the world, then we will also accordingly come to understand more about appropriate morality and ethics.
- By contrast, Weber distinguishes sharply between facts and values as being distinct.
- Weber's fact/value distinction has generally had a major impact on modern sociology especially in the U.S.
- Objectivity: given some concept as defined by a researcher, the facts about the world may be scientifically obtained.
Max Weber: Methods

- The facts are always dependent upon how one chooses to define one's concepts, but given some definition, scientific measurement provides a clear answer to the extent that the information is available (e.g., poverty as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau),

- In principle, people with different values should be able to agree upon what the facts are because scientific procedures of inquiry and the universal canons of logic that underlie the validation of facts provide the same results regardless of the values of the investigator.
Max Weber vs. Karl Marx: Methods

- For Weber, sociological concepts are ultimately just tools; what matters most is how the researcher uses them to understand some particular social phenomenon or social problem.

- Unlike Weber, Marx said “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself.”
Max Weber: Multidimensionality

- Webers multidimensional view of inequality:
- Marx emphasized the importance of class in understanding inequality; particularly ownership and control of the means of production.
- By contrast, Weber’s view is that class, status, and party may each be independently important in shaping inequality and stratification in society; class, status, and party (＝politics) are separate dimensions of inequality and stratification.
Max Weber: Class

- According to Weber, class referred to economic position and its attendant effect on individuals life chances.
- Life chances: “The fundamental aspects of an individuals future possibilities that are shaped by class membership.”
- For Weber, class is not simply a matter of ownership versus non-ownership of capital or the means of production, but can involve any sort of “market situation.” Thus, class is ultimately “market situation.”
- Ones market situation may be complex and class is ultimately influenced by ones definition as there many different kinds of markets (e.g., labor, land, stocks, etc.)
Max Weber: Class

- In contrast to Marx, Weber allowed for more than two distinct social classes and even suggested that “the proletariat were really a highly differentiated group.”
- An individual's class position may sometimes be complicated because a worker is a laborer but she may also own capital (e.g., a pension, a savings account, a home, or even an inherited fortune).
- Social class: “group who share the same economically shaped life chances,” An objective economic fact.
Max Weber: Class

- Persons may sometimes gain market advantage by engaging in social processes that limit the competition.
- For example, educational credentials may sometimes serve as a means of a “market closure” (i.e., reducing the competition for certain jobs or occupations).
- Racist, sexist, and elitist attitudes may also serve as a means of reducing the competition for the benefit of some privileged groups.
Max Weber: Status

- Status: ranking based on social prestige
  - It is subjective; a sentiment in peoples minds.
  - Individuals, in particular status groups, tend to view themselves as a social community due to their similar lifestyles.
  - Status groups tend to be restrictive in an attempt to preserve their advantages in society.
Max Weber: Politics

- Weber, like Marx, was interested in the relationship between stratification and political power.

- Weber, unlike Marx, argued that not all political phenomena or institutional outcomes in modern bureaucratic societies can be reduced to the control of a single class.

- Weber argued there were multiple classes in societies, and individuals also have multiple identities (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, etc.) making his understanding of social stratification more flexible than Marx's.

- Status differences often undermine the development of class consciousness and class struggle.
Max Weber: Final Remarks

- Class, status, and party tend to overlap; a person ranked favorably on one dimension will tend to be ranked favorably on the other dimensions as well.
- However, status inconsistency refers to the extent to which a person's ranking on one dimension of inequality (class, status, and party) differs from her ranking on the other dimensions.
- Persons in status incongruent positions may experience more stress and be more socially and politically active.
- Class, status, and party can be rewards in themselves as well as resources to obtain more rewards.