

S o c i o l o g y

Class and Max Weber

Quantum 05

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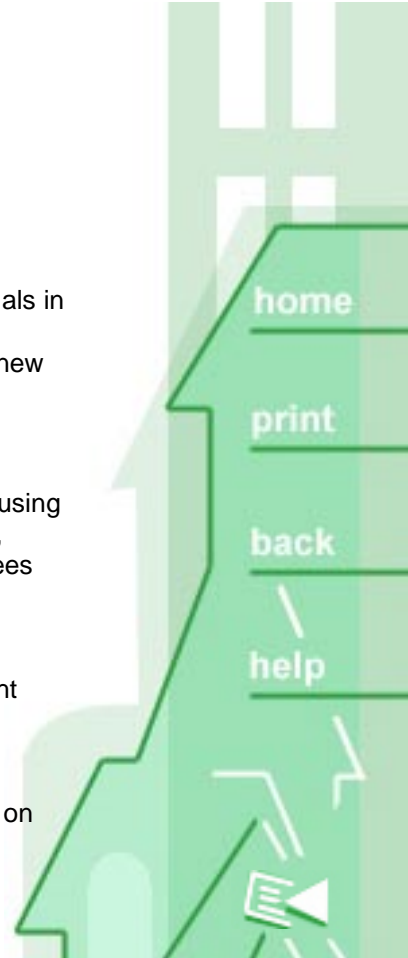
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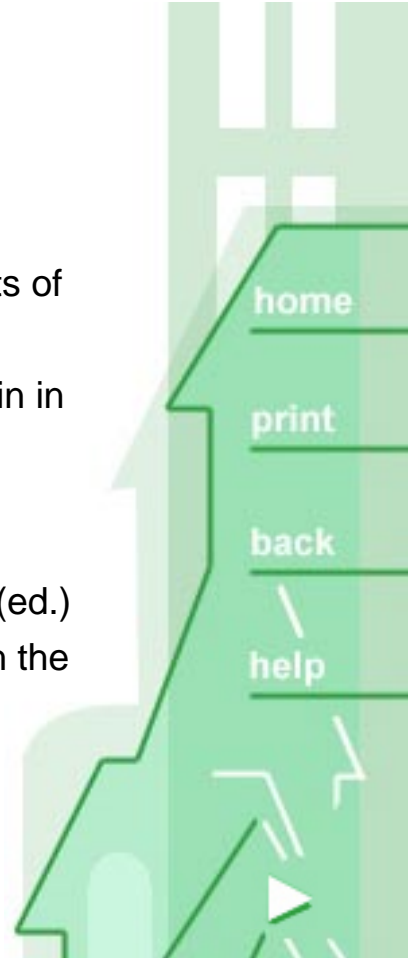
Objectives

By the end of this quantum you will be able explain the key elements of the theories of Weber and identify their strengths and weaknesses. You will also be able to assess evidence of change in Modern Britain in terms of these theories.

PRE-REQUISITES

Use the appropriate sections of your textbook, HARALAMBOS, M. (ed.) *Sociology – Themes and Perspectives* (4th Edition) to help you with the activities.

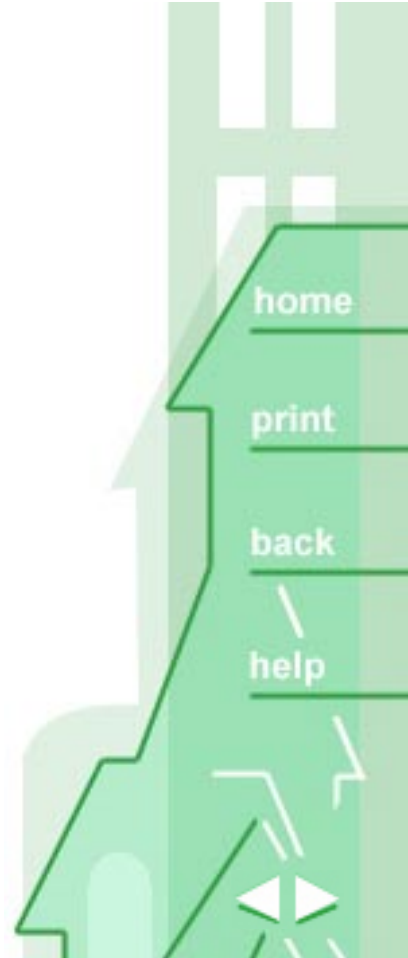
Discuss the points given with fellow students, tutors or members of your family.



Class and Max Weber

WELCOME

Max Weber was writing in response to Marx, at a slightly later stage in the development of capitalism, so that he was able to see more clearly some of the developments which Marx mentioned. In particular, he was interested in the rise of middle class occupations.



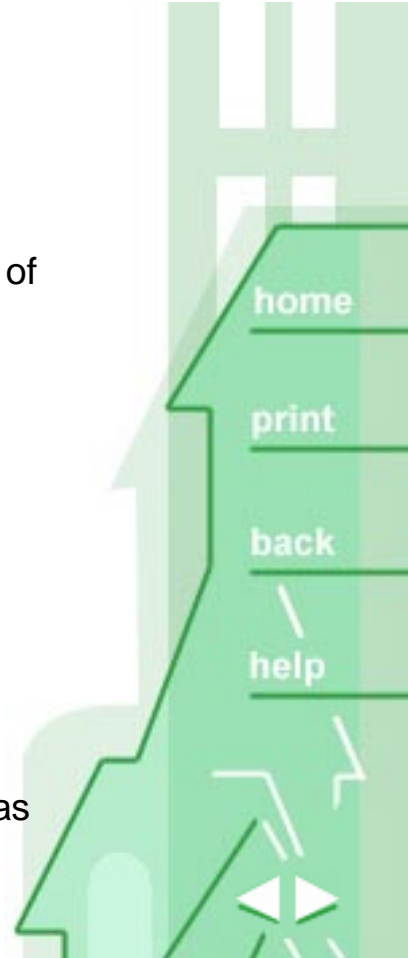
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WEBER'S THEORY OF SOCIAL CLASS

Max Weber thought that Marx's definition of class, as a huge range of occupations sharing a common relationship to the means of production, was far too wide. People could never feel allegiance to such a large grouping and were therefore unlikely to develop the common sense of purpose which would develop into revolutionary fervour.

Weber, as an exponent of social action theory argued that the subjective understanding of class was important, as well as the objective position in the occupational structure.

He also believed that status differences were at least as important as economic differences, and that status might be independent of economic power, as discussed under caste.



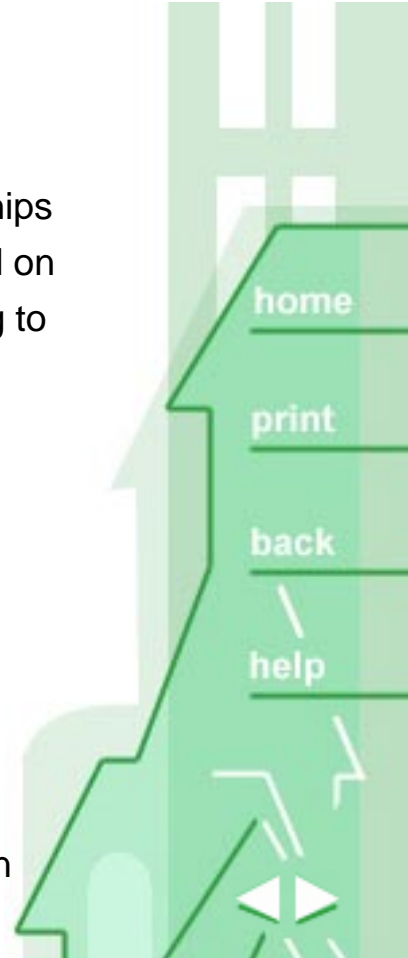
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Weber's theory then, covers class, for instance economic relationships determined by market position; status, or social relationships based on similar culture and lifestyles, and party, or political influence relating to common class or status position.

CLASS POSITION

For Marx, class position was determined by whether you owned capital, or whether you worked to create profit for others. Weber thought that property ownership or non-ownership created a major division in society, but that there were many subdividers and counterforces operating within and across that division.

For Weber, as for most subsequent researchers, class is linked to occupation. Classes exist as groupings of occupations in a common market position.

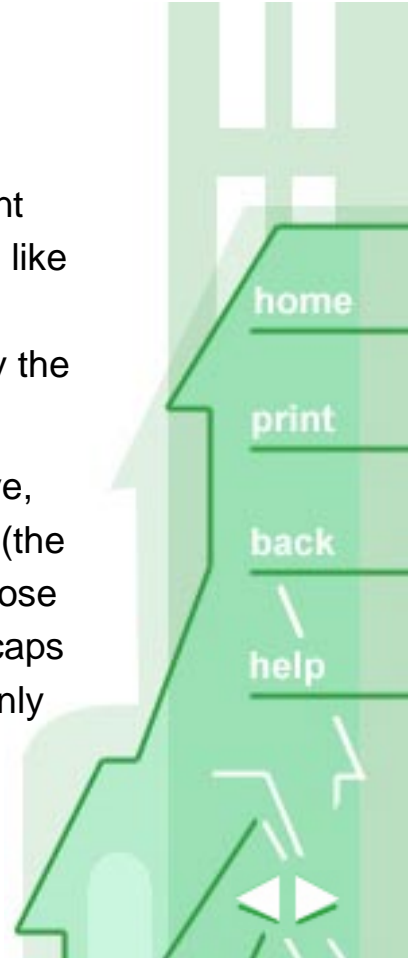


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The real differences between occupations, or even between different levels within the same occupation, make it very difficult for anything like class consciousness to develop. Market position is determined by supply and demand: by the assets that people offer 'for sale' and by the demand for them.

Ownership of land or factories (the property classes) is very lucrative, but so is ownership of special musical, sporting or intellectual skills (the acquisitive classes). These are the positively privileged classes. Those who have no skills, or skills which many others also have, or handicaps to prevent them taking a full part in the labour market, can expect only low rewards.

Women with young children, for example, are disadvantaged in the labour market, and may have to accept low paid, insecure jobs with unsocial hours. These are the negatively privileged classes.

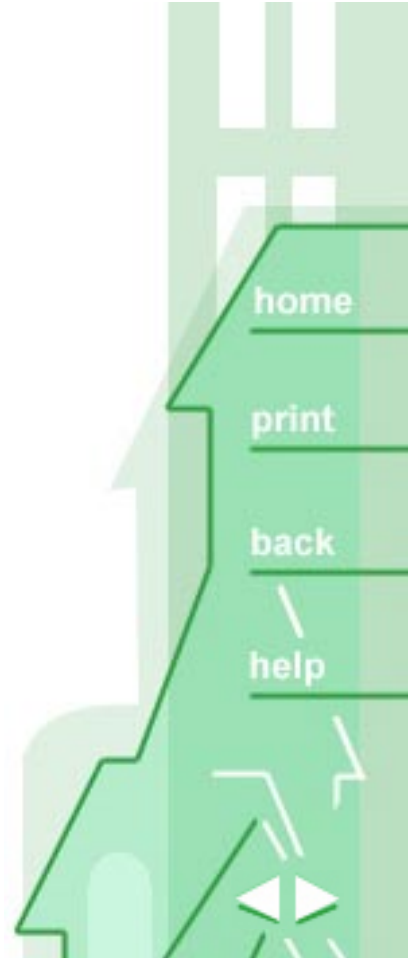


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Weber's view of class then, was of a range of class situations, grouped into four main groupings or constellations: the dominant business and commercial class; the property-less white-collar workers and intelligensia; the petty bourgeoisie (self employed); and the manual working class.

STATUS GROUPS

Although status is closely linked to market position, it is determined more by cultural patterns and life-style. Status is a subjective, personal relationship, relating to patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and therefore people are more likely to feel a sense of identity and common cause than in a class grouping.



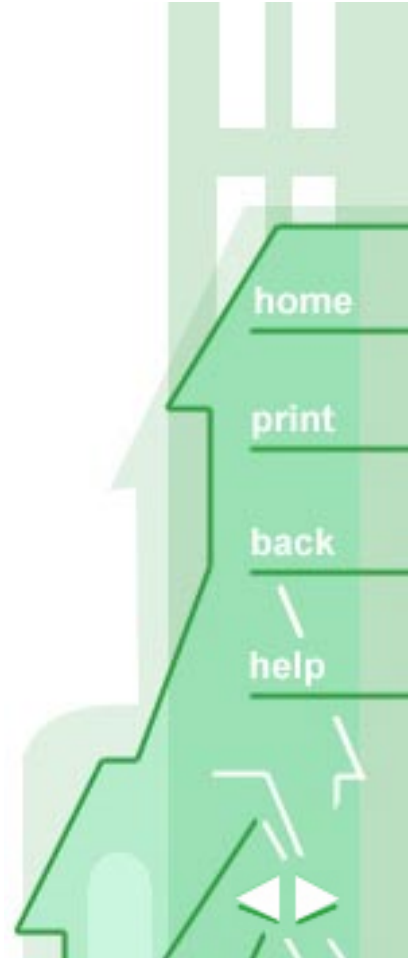
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Some status groups are linked to occupation, for example a profession such as doctors; others are entirely unrelated to occupation, and cut right across class groupings, for example ethnicity. For this reason, status grouping may interfere radically with any attempt to raise class consciousness.

Discussion Point

How would Weberian theory explain racial conflict between groups of working class lads on the street of London, for example?

What would be a Marxist explanation of the conflict?



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PARTY

Occupational groups or status groups can improve their relative position in terms of rewards and prestige by banding together as a 'party' or interest groups, and using political leverage of one kind or another to get what they want.

Doctors managed to do this in the 19th century, by putting on pressure for a law to be passed – the Medical Registration Act, 1858, requiring anyone practising as a doctor to be licensed by the BMA.

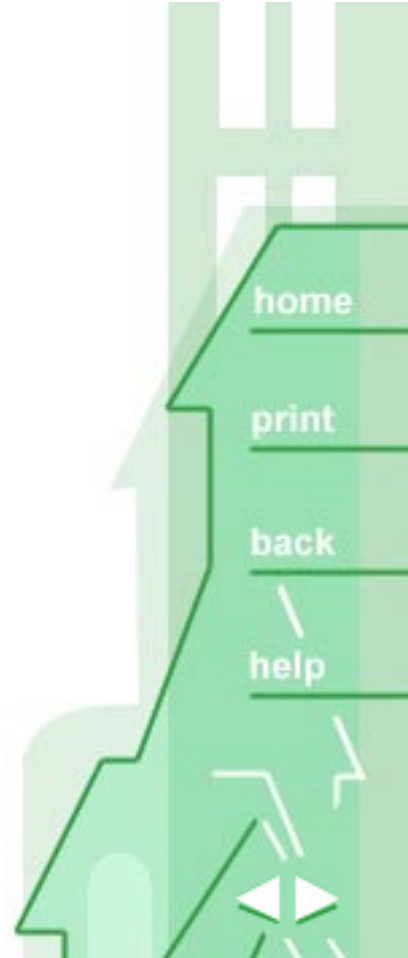
This required a lengthy period of training, which Parry & Parry (1977) suggest serves mainly to restrict entry to the profession. If the supply of doctors is kept low, and demand remains high, then the 'price' of their services will rise.



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Where there is a large supply of any particular skill, then the 'price' will fall, as has happened to clerical workers with the spread of mass literacy and numeracy.

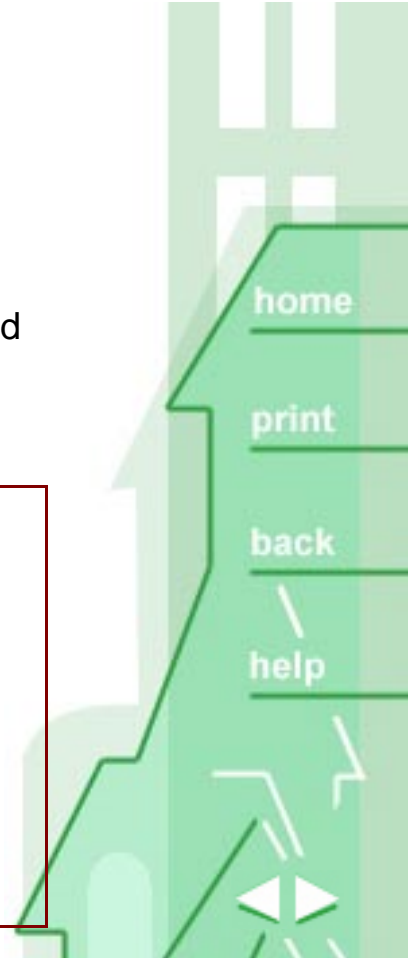
Groups who have exerted influence to considerable effect are printers and miners. Both groups have now lost status, income and power with the introduction of new technology, which reduces the need for their specialist skills. In the case of miners, alternative sources of fuel have been developed, and coal mines have been closed; miners can no longer control the supply of fuel and so have lost power.



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Activity

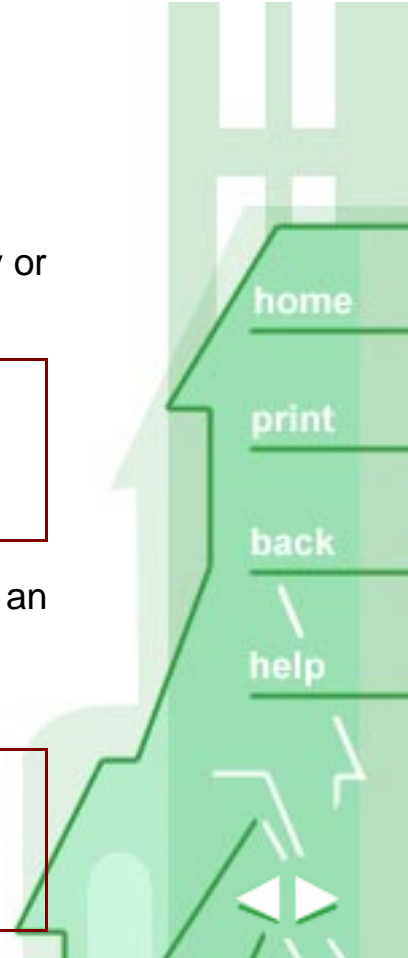
- 1 Can you identify groups which have managed to improve their market position by either increasing demand for their goods and services, or by restricting the supply of people who can offer them?



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- 2 Can you identify groups which have lost ground in the market, because of changes in demand, or because of new technology or because of changes in legislation?

- 3 Can you identify other ways in which a status group other than an occupational group might improve its situation, or influence decisions in its favour?

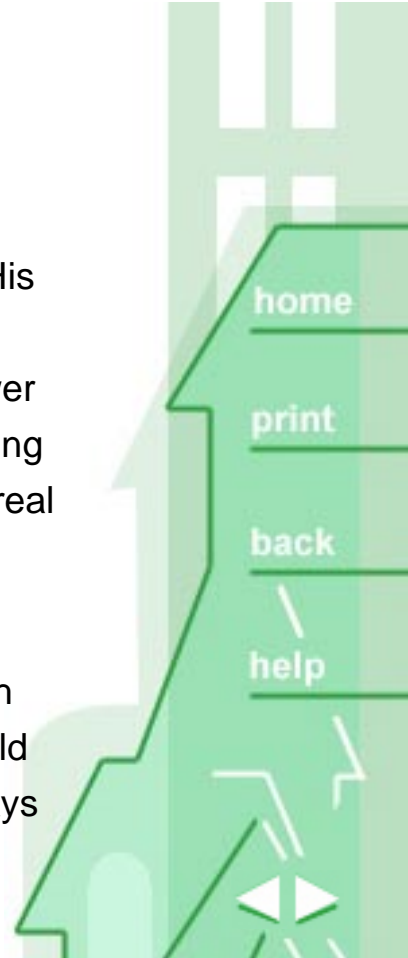


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CRITICISMS OF WEBER

The main criticisms of Weber centre round the question of power. His theory allows for distribution of power amongst the population, but Marxists argue that he does not allow for the **concentration** of power at the top. This allows the powerful to create their own rules, including the creation of an ideology which distracts attention away from the real mechanisms.

Another criticism is that, although Weber identified four main groupings, his linking of class to market position allows for too much fragmentation: in fact, taken to its logical extreme, each person could be in a class of their own! This may not be a valid criticism, as it plays down Weber's stress on the effects of 'party' or interest groups.



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Weber's theory of supply and demand is very useful in explaining differences within the working class and middle classes. It has formed the basis of much empirical research into modern class groups.

However, it is less useful as a tool to study the situation of the really powerful.

For that reason, it is useful to try to combine the two theories, keeping Marx's analysis of the ruling class and its overall control of power, but also allowing for the class divisions below that group, using Weber's theory to explain how they are created.

Combining the two is not as easy as it may seem, because the definitions depend on different relationships.

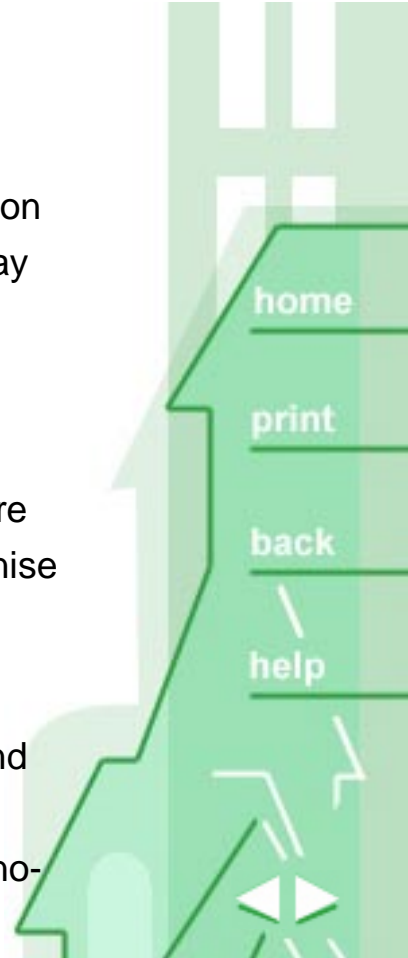


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It may be useful to think in terms of the difference between production of goods and distribution of rewards. Marx's theory relates to the way goods are produced. Power (and economic rewards) come directly from the control of this process.

For the workers, in whatever field, and at whatever level, the distribution of rewards is organised around status divisions which are largely traditional, but which also relate to the opportunities to organise as effective interest groups.

Some sociologists operating within a Marxist tradition, for example, Paul Thompson, argue that employers play on existing divisions, and increase them, in order to fragment resistance. If everyone is on a different wage scale, and different conditions of employment, then no-one can find common cause with which to fight the employers.



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Marx's theory has been criticised as being too deterministic – the economic forces he identified are seen to mould our destinies in ways which allow little opportunity for the operation of choice. Weber's theory allows for much more fluidity, because it allows room for interpretation within a social context.

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