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# UNIT 5 MARX AND WEBER

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## Structure

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*Mafuza Gasmin, Assistant Professor, Sociology, CC10*

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we shall discuss the views of two the founding fathers of sociology, namely, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Both these thinkers have made tremendous contributions for sociological thought. We will of course concentrate on only one aspect of their contribution – social stratification. Both have clear views on this subject and their views are not similar. 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.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Karl Marx (1818-1881) is regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of all times. His views have influenced people classes and nations. His main contribution to understanding society and social processes was through his theory of historical materialism. This presented a radical alternative to the traditional views. Marx tried to understand social development in terms of class conflict. Social stratification was central in his analysis. On the one hand he saw it as a divisive rather than an integrative structure and on the other hand he saw it as inevitable for social development.

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 separately the views of Marx and Weber on stratification and then compare them. We will then discuss the significance in analysing class in understanding stratification systems.

## 5.2 MARX ON STRATIFICATION

Marx used Historical Materialism as the theory to understand social change. For him the first premise of history was the existence of living human beings. The physical organization of human society and the relations human beings have with nature are important indications of development. All living things depend on nature for survival. Plants need soil and water, cows need grass and tigers need to hunt other animals for survival. Human beings also depend on nature for survival. However the basic difference between human beings and other living things is that they can transform nature for their survival while other living things adapt to nature. A cow eats grass but it cannot grow grass. Human beings exploit nature but they have the power to transform it as well. This means that human beings are able to produce their own means of subsistence. This is the basic difference between human and other living things. Marx therefore noted in his work, *German Ideology*, that “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or by anything one likes. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is determined by their physical condition. In producing their actual means of subsistence men indirectly produce their actual material life”.

It was through production that human beings developed. Primitive human beings were totally dependent on nature as they subsisted through hunting or food gathering. These societies produced the minimum needs for survival. As human beings gradually started transforming nature society was able to produce more for existence of the people.

### 5.2.1 Division of Labour

Through the development of technology, human beings were able to improve agriculture and could form settled communities. As production grew, the community produced more than its requirements. There was surplus. It was now possible to support people who were not directly involved in the production of food. In earlier societies all people performed similar activities which were needed for survival, namely, food, clothing and shelter. Once there was surplus it was possible for people to diversify their activities. Hence some produced food, which was sufficient to feed all, while others were engaged in other activities. This is called the division of labour.

This system resulted in some people gaining control over the mean of production by excluding others. Thus property, which was held by all, came under the control of only some members giving rise to the notion of private property. Hence now the interests of all people were no longer common. There were differences in interests. Thus the interests of individuals became different from the interests of the community. Marx stated that “Division of Labour and private property are identical expressions”. It implied the contradictions between individual and communal interest.

These differences which occur in human society which are due to the existence of private property lead to the formation of classes which form the basis of social stratification. In all stratified societies, there are two major groups: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class exploits the subject class. As a result there is basic conflict of interest between the two classes. Marx further stated in his work, *Contributions of the Critique of Political Economy*, that the various institutions of society such as the legal and political systems, religion etc. are instruments of ruling class domination and serve to further its interests. Let us now examine the term ‘class’.

### 5.2.2 Meaning of Class

Marx used the term ‘class’ to refer to the two main strata in all stratification systems. As mentioned earlier, there are two major social groups in all stratified societies: a ruling

class and a subject class. The ruling class derives its power through its control over the means of production. It is thus able to appropriate the labour of another class. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes class in this way: "Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class."

**Activity 1**

**Discuss with people you know what is meant by class. Note down the various interpretations you get. Do some of them tally with Marx's conception of class?**

From Marx's perspective, systems of stratification derive from the relationships of social groups to the forces of production. Marx used the term class to refer to the main strata in all stratification systems. His definition of class has specific features. Class comprises two major groups, one of which controls the means of production is able to appropriate the labour of the other class due to the specific position it occupies in the social economy. Hence a class is a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. This in fact distinguishes one class from the other.

Another aspect of classes, which is seen from Marx's description given above, is that they are in opposition to each other. At the same time there is a relationship of dependence between classes. If one class can appropriate the labour of another class because of its control over the means of production, it means that the two classes are dependent on each other but they are also opposed to each other. The dialectics of class therefore is a result of this combination of dependence and opposition. The relationship between classes is a dynamic relationship which results in social change. This is why classes are central to Marx's approach to social transformation. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx wrote, "Hitherto, the history of all societies is the history of class struggle." In other words, changes in the history of mankind are caused by the conflict of classes. Classes conflict is hence the engine for social change.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Write down Marx's ideas on the division of labour. Use about five lines for Your answer.

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- 2) Describe what is the meaning of class according to Marx. Use about five lines for your answer.

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## 5.2.2 Growth of Class

Development of society is through the process of class conflict. The domination of one class over the other leads to class conflict. Alongside the production process also develops due to changes in technology, resulting in its improvement. This leads to changes in the class structure as classes become obsolete with increase in production techniques. New classes are then formed. Replacing the old classes. This leads to further class conflict. Marx believed that Western societies had developed through four main stages: primitive communism, ancient society, feudal society and capitalist society. Primitive communism is represented by societies of pre-history. Those societies, which are dependent on hunting and food gathering and which, have no division of labour. From then onwards, all societies are divided into two major classes: masters and slaves in ancient society, land lords and serfs (tenants) in feudal society and capitalist and wage labour in capitalist society. During each historical epoch, the labour power required for production was supplied by the subject class, that is by slaves, serfs and wage labourers respectively.

The polarization of classes into opposite groups is a result of class-consciousness. This is a separate but related phenomenon. It is not necessarily the result of class formation. Class-consciousness is linked with the process of polarization of classes. A class can exist without its being aware of its class interests.

### Box 5.01

**When people in a particular group, the membership of which is determined by the production relations into which they are born or enter into voluntarily, become aware of their existence as a distinctive class they are said to be conscious of their class. For instance, workers are constantly organizing wage struggles in their own interests. These interests are the outcome of the economic relations of capitalist society. They exist objectively, in the sense that they have not been invented by any theoretician, political party, trade union or any such external force. But the existence of these objective conditions is not enough. The workers must be aware of these conditions.**

In the extract from *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx has referred to the importance of class formation when he noted that only when a class is aware of its opposition to another class it is conscious of its being. In another place, in his major contribution, *Capital*, he comments that workers left on their own may not be aware of their class interests as being opposed to those of the other (capitalist) class. He noted that the advance of capitalist production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit looks upon the conditions of production as self-evident laws of nature. In the ordinary run of things the labourer can be left to the natural laws of production as self-evident laws of nature. In the ordinary run of things the labourer can be left to the natural laws of production.

This static nature of class relations changes into a dynamic one with the development of class-consciousness. Without class-consciousness the working is merely in relation to capital. It is a class in itself. In his work *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx observes that the working class which exists in this manner is only a mass of individuals and is a mere class in itself. When it unites in its struggle against capital it "forms itself into a class for itself. The interests it defends becomes class interests."

Hence in the Marxist framework we find that class is a dynamic unit. It may be subject to change with the advancement of technology, but the basis for its formulation remains the same. Class forms the basis of the stratification system in any society. Classes are related to the production process of each society. Changes in the class structure occur when there are changes in the production process. Thus the system of stratification in a society is dependent on the relations of production.

Marx 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.



Labour working at a building site

*Courtesy: A. Yadav*

### 5.3.1 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 5.02**

**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 of 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 class 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.

### 5.3.2 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 2**

**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 as 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.

**Check Your Progress 2**

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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**5.4 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARX AND WEBER**

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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.

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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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In the above unit we have discussed the views two of the founders of sociology, Karl Marx and Max Weber, on social stratification. Both thinkers have views that have shaped and influenced human development.

Karl Marx's views were based his theory of historical materialism. He viewed social stratification from the historical perspective. The changes in stratification in human society were based on the changing nature of production. Classes formed the basis of the system of stratification. As the production relations changed the nature of stratification also changed. New classes were formed replacing the old ones. This also resulted in new relations between classes. Hence for Marx classes and stratification were similar. Marx stressed on the role of class-consciousness as an important instrument for realizing class objectives.

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.

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## 5.6 KEY WORDS

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- 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.

Marx and Weber

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

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## 5.7 FURTHER READINGS

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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.

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## 5.8 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) As technology developed production also improved. Surplus could be produced, and this led to classification of activities, or division of labour. This also led to some people controlling means of production, hence to private property. Thus Marx pointed out that the interests of people became different from those of the community, and class came into existence.
- 2) For Marx Class devotes the two main strata found in stratification systems. There is a ruling class and a subject class. The means of production are controlled by the ruling class and this is how it appropriates the labour of the working class. Finally these classes are opposed or antagonistic to one another.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 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 cannot 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 similarity that both scholars emphasized the importance of the class, their views were not really similar.