

Developments in Neo-Weberian Class Analysis. A Discussion and Comparison

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This article deals with some contributions to literature on Weber's theory about social stratification emerged from studies of the last forty years. Scholars' attention has been devoted to status group as a social and legal category concerning lifestyle, collective identity social ranking and exclusion practices rather than on economic condition. These analyses pave the way to an exact idea of Weber's notion of economic and social class and to its recent interpretation. The last paragraph develops conceptual and theoretical comparisons on literature dealing with Marx's and Weber's interpretations of the world exploitation. From a more general point of view, the paragraph compares the two scholars' contributions to studies about inequality.

Preliminary observations

Almost a century after Max Weber's demise, scholarly interest for his propositions and concepts has continued unabated. This article aims to provide a presentation of, and a comparison between, some contributions to the secondary literature on Weber and social stratification which have come out in the last forty years. The comparison will be conceptual and theoretical, to the effect that both the interpretations of Weberian categories, and their use for the purpose of theory construction, will be considered. For most of the secondary literature has dealt with this subject with particular theoretical goals. The conceptual comparison will bear on which Weberian categories have been focused on and how they have been interpreted, rather than on Weber's own texts. The theoretical comparison will chiefly deal with the question of whether and how Weber's statements on social stratification and inequality are related to Marx.

Conceptual Comparisons: Status groups

The post-War reception of Weber in the United States has objected to the limited extent that pre-War American sociology has considered his stratification categories (Horowitz 1964: 345-346). More specifically, criticism has been

raised against its attempt to formulate non-Marxist theoretical frameworks and concepts by stressing social status (*Stand*) at the expense of other Weberian categories (Parkin 1978: 604-608). Since the 1970's, several contributions have come out that deal with the definitions and uses of Weber's concepts of class and status, carefully compare them with Marx's, and emphasize differences while avoiding radical contrapositions¹. Attention has been paid especially to the Weberian concept of status. Accordingly, the literature on this stratification category will be first presented and discussed.

The semantic components of this concept have been identified as a position in society, personal esteem and deference, a system of legal and cultural privileges, and a collectivity of persons having a similar culture and life style (Holton and Turner 1989: 137). The secondary literature on Weber has dealt with some of such components. Giddens has laid stress on status awareness on the one hand, on the other, «on forms of group structure which originate outside of the economic order» (Giddens 1973: 80). Alternatively, the Weberian concept of status groups has been interpreted either as «a real organization of social networks» or «as a micro-situational behavior». In both cases, members of a status group share, in addition to a cultural lifestyle, a recognized social identity and social ranking (Collins 2004: 268-269). Chan and Goldthorpe (2007: 514-515) have similarly defined status by reference to the degree of social honor attached to positions in a social hierarchy of occupations and expressed by means of differential associations.

Béteille, who in his major work on inequality had argued along Weberian lines that status does not prevent access to positions of power and authority even in traditional societies (Béteille 1977), in a subsequent article has accordingly maintained that «status may be a matter of rights, but it is also a matter of esteem, and the two do not necessarily move in step with each other» (Béteille 1996: 522). Lockwood (1996: 527-529), commenting on Béteille's article, has observed that status as a legal and a social category do not overlap, as Weber himself had first pointed out. Rather, status inequality in modern capitalist democracies has an impact of its own on life chances, even when formally equal rights are granted. More recently, Kalberg has maintained that this Weberian notion refers both to «social honor, esteem, and prestige», and to «action orientations that protect social distance and cultivate exclusiveness». The group-specific action orientations are subject to contingent external determinants (Kalberg 2008: 280-282).

¹ For a detailed and informative presentation of Weber's concepts of class, closure, opportunity, and status, see Swedberg (2005: 37-38, 183-184, 268-270). A new translation has come out in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (10: 137-152). See its presentation by Waters and Waters (2010).

Equal political status, whereby citizens have the same political entitlements, their different social and material situation notwithstanding, is a prerequisite to their membership in a national community (Barbalet 2010: 210-211). As citizens, however, citizens must face bureaucracy, «a formidable interest group in its own right» and «the most powerful of all status groups», who may exert power disregarding not only property ownership (Parkin 1982: 103-104), but also the formal equality provided by democratic systems (Holton and Turner 1989: 148-149). Insofar as differentiated from classes, status groups are «of vital significance in numerous phases of economic development» (Giddens 1971: 166). Privileged classes and status groups, insofar as they are politically organized in the form of political parties or social movements, have influence on democratic institutions (Giddens 1973: 44). Status, as defined by legal rights, provides but one meaning of this Weberian notion. Still, it has been the object of particular interest, as equal political rights do not translate into equal social status.

In keeping with a consensus among Weber's scholars that «class theories [...] include authority, rewards, status, and life chances» (Esping-Andersen 1993: 18), many of those who have dealt with Weber on status have also lingered on the Weberian notions of class, social class, and party. Some, like Cox and Giddens, state that the abstract and unfinished character of Weber's writings on this subject «is too generalized and inconsistent to be of any considerable value» (Cox 1950: 227) and may at most «offer a minimal introduction to the complex problems explored in his theoretical writings» (Giddens 1973: 44). Others, however, have remarked that Weber's distinction between class and status has become «commonplace in materials in introductory courses and texts dealing with social stratification», and have made themselves use of this Weberian distinction in their theoretical and empirical works (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007: 512).

By way of summary, scholarly attention has been devoted to status groups as a social and legal category that is predicated on lifestyle, collective identity, social ranking, and exclusionary practices, rather than on economic situation. These observations pave the way to a presentation and discussion of how Weber's notion of class (rather than status) has been interpreted.

Conceptual Comparisons: Economic and Social Classes

The secondary literature has generally speaking referred, in addition to status groups, also to the other Weberian categories of economic class – distinguished between ownership classes and commercial classes – and of social class. In a careful perusal of the pertinent Weberian texts, Holton and Turner

have maintained that Weber has adhered to a 'weak' class conception. This conception has involved abandonment of the labor theory of value, and an emphasis on markets as sources of «inequalities of power and ownership and control over resources». Relevant inequalities center on the ownership dimension and the possession of marketable skills. Relations between market-based classes have an impersonal, *Gesellschaft*-like character, «tend to predominate in periods of [...] economic expansion», are sources of differential life chances, and are not necessarily conflictual (Holton and Turner 1989: 180-184). The propositions that the market is a source of power, and that differential market chances produce different life chances and therefore different social classes separated by mobility barriers, are also found in other presentations of the Weberian class notion (Collins 1986: 126-128; Holton and Turner 1989: 182-183; Parkin 1982: 93).

Breen, in his informative contribution to a discussion of the neo-Weberian approach to class, states that a Weberian class analysis should not only relate differences in life chances to differential class positions; for life chances also depend on a variety of non-market factors. Life chances, in their relations to markets, are however most relevant to a Weberian class analysis (Breen 2005: 43). In this connection, Breen refers to the empirical and theoretical works by the prominent British sociologist John H. Goldthorpe, whose neo-Weberian class schema focuses on employment relations as an important source of differential life chances of individuals. According to Goldthorpe, employment status (such as employer, self-employed or employee), and regulation of employment by contracts (Goldthorpe 1996: 486), are forms of «resources, opportunities and constraints that their particular class situations imply» (Goldthorpe 1996: 500). Insofar as these are factors of asset specificity and monitoring difficulty, they provide «the crucial dimensions along which work is differentiated» (Breen 2005: 37).

Giddens observes that Weberian classes differ from status groups in that they are defined by market situations rather than by «subjective awareness of solidarity», and are created in the sphere of production rather than consumption. Since there could be «as many class divisions as there are minute gradations of economic positions», Weberian classes are indeterminate (Giddens 1973: 80; see also Barbalet 1980: 408). Social classes, as determined by similar mobility opportunities «within a common cluster of class situations» (Giddens 1971: 165), may provide a solution to the problem of class boundaries, which has beset both Marxist and Weberian class analysis (Breen 2005: 42; Giddens 1973: 110-111). Referring to Weber's concept of social class, and building on Giddens' theoretical statements, Ronald Breiger has made use of mobility tables to show that occupational classes, each with its own market-determined class situation, but having common mobility chances, can be aggregated to form internally homogenous social classes (Breiger 1981).

Along similar lines, Parkin has argued that «when social class is defined in such close association with the conditions of the marketplace, a problem arises in the attempt to show where one class ends and another one begins» (Parkin 1982: 93). Parkin's solution to this problem, followed by Murphy (2001), has hinged on Weber's concept of closure. By means of this social process – Weber and Neo-Weberian sociologists have contended – some groups mobilize power in order to exclude others from, or obtain from them, access to the rewards and opportunities conferred by privileged life chances. The actors involved in processes of social closure, whether by means of exclusionary or usurpation practices, may be social classes or ethnic groups (Parkin 1979: 46-47, 60-71; 74-86; 1982: 100-102). In either case, these processes presuppose «periods of relative stability and social peace», in which moral identification with others sharing similar life chances becomes possible. In contrast, «conditions of general economic dislocation and crisis» promote the formation of classes based not on common identities, but rather on common market opportunities (Parkin 1978: 622-623).

The reception of the Weberian categories of status groups and economic and social classes has then laid stress on the market as a source of differential life chances, and on common opportunities of class mobility as a factor of class structuration and a possible solution to the problem of class boundaries. The issue of exploitation has however divided Weberian scholarship. In keeping with one interpretive position, the concept of exploitation is compatible with Weberian sociological categories. Thus, Giddens holds that the socially conditioned production of different life chances may be defined as exploitation, which obtains in any society (Giddens 1973: 101-103, 130-132). By the same token, Parkin maintains that «exploitative relationships in the neo-Weberian sense» may be found whenever access to rewards and opportunities is restricted by some social groups to their own advantage, and disadvantage of others. Accordingly, there is «no compelling reason why the term [of exploitation] should be restricted to its conventional Marxist use» (Parkin 1979: 46).

Barbalet has taken exception to this view. Exploitation – he affirms – «is related to the appropriation of the productive capacity of one group by another». It does not, accordingly, result from distributive relations, which govern life chances only, but rather from the relations of distribution and production combined. As Barbalet argues, while social closure causes social divisions and different life chances, there are no reasons for calling classes the collectivities that result from such divisions. Life chances concern unequal distribution, rather than relations of production and exploitation (Barbalet 1982: 491-495). In a different publication, Barbalet has taken issue not with the neo-Weberian theory of social closure, but with Weber's own concepts of class and status. Weber's classes, according to Barbalet, are as many as there are class situations and class interests. Their number is therefore indeterminate (Barbalet 1980).

Conceptual and Theoretical Comparisons

Whether or not exploitation should be considered a common theme by Marxist and Weberian scholars is however a moot question. Some secondary literature will be briefly presented here, which has dealt with the use of the term of exploitation on the part of Marx and Weber, and more in general, has compared their contributions to the study of inequality. There is among Weberian scholars a common emphasis on some conceptual and theoretical continuity between these two authors, in conjunction however with an awareness of the relevant differences between them. As some of them have maintained, Weber and Marx have concurred in considering control over goods as a crucial cause of inequality. Weber, however, has laid greater emphasis than Marx on status-differences and different market situations, and less emphasis on the social differences originating from the organization of production in capitalism, and from ownership of the means of production (Bendix 1974: 150-156; Giddens 1973: 78-80).

As Bendix has put it (1974: 153), «in Weber's view, groups are formed as readily from common ideas leading to common economic interests, as they are the other way around». Eric Olin Wright has made a sustained effort to elucidate Marx's concept of class, and to argue that exploitation and class interests are central dimensions to this concept (Wright 1976; 1980; 1985; 2005; 2009; Wright and Cho 1992). To this end, Wright has produced since the 1980's several investigations on the similarities and differences of Weber's concept of class from Marx's (see especially Wright 1985: 106-108; 2002: 838-846; 2009; Wright and Cho 1992: 86). Focusing on his most recent and most detailed contributions (Wright 2002; 2009), this author has argued that there are several convergences and divergences insofar as this concept is concerned.

Convergences are found in the following points: 1) the identification of classes by their position in relation to other classes, and therefore the use of a relational concept of class, rather than identifying it by quantitative names; 2) an emphasis on common interests flowing from property relations, and on class consciousness, as the most relevant sources of class conflict; 3) the tendency to produce collective action, though this tendency – according to both authors – does not define classes; 4) the consideration of status groups as a basis of solidarity and collective action which are alternative to classes, but are weakened or destroyed in periods of rapid capitalist transformation; 5) finally, there is a common emphasis on the importance of power within social structures. In addition to these similarities between the two authors, Wright has also stressed a few significant differences in their explanation of inequality.

Firstly, Weber has emphasized differential access to life chances as a crucial consequence of property-related social classes, but it has been Marx who has called attention to the importance of exploitation, defined as the ability to ex-

tract labor effort, and therefore surplus value, even though there is «no fundamental barrier within the logic of Weberian categories for including exploitation in the study of class» (Wright 2009: 112). Secondly, Weber's definition of life chances has emphasized instrumental rationality, as «embodied in the social interactions that generate these life chances», while directing attention away from exploitation; that is, from investigating «how particular ways of organizing exchange and production impose harm on workers». Weberian class analysis, in other words, dwells on locations within market relations and the rationality of exchanges in the labor market. Marxist class analysis deals with locations within relations of domination and exploitation in production, and the normative issues that flow therefrom (Wright 2002: 844, 850-852; 2009: 116).

The two theoretical traditions, as Wright concludes, grapple with distinct problems, and have different concepts and normative concerns. Wright's investigations on these traditions, while not unsympathetic to Weber, are clearly within the Marxist fold, as indicated by his stress on the relevance of exploitation for class analysis. More than other authors, whether Marxist or Weberian, Wright has succeeded in producing a careful account and evaluation of their respective strengths and weaknesses. Wright is well acquainted with contributions on this subject by other authors (see for instance Wright 2002: 843, note 22; 2009: 111, note 11). But, unlike all of them, he has underlined a similarity of Marx and Weber «in their treatment of the relationship between class and status» (Wright 2002: 842), as classes and status groups are viewed by both authors as different and competing bases of collective action and social identity. What is more, Wright has preferred not to deal with the Weberian concept of social class (as distinguished from market-determined class), nor with the question of the boundaries of economic classes.

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