

THE SOCIOLOGY OF ECONOMIC LIFE: COMPARING THE PERSPECTIVES OF KARL MARX AND MAX WEBER

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This paper seeks to examine and conceptualize the sociology of economic life through the perspectives of two classical sociological theorists, Karl Marx and Max Weber. The study begins by exploring the conceptual contrasts between these thinkers and provides a brief historical overview of their respective contributions to the understanding of economic and social life. Both Marx and Weber devoted considerable attention to the sociological analysis of the economy; therefore, this paper focuses on their interpretations of bourgeois-capitalist society, particularly Weber's notion of rationalisation and Marx's concept of alienation. Furthermore, the paper compares Marx's argument regarding the formation of social classes through the organisation of production with Weber's emphasis on status distinctions, power relations, and collective social action.

To present the discussion in a systematic manner, the paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the major themes in the works of Marx and Weber, highlighting both the similarities and differences in their understanding of human agency, economic organisation, and the relationship between economy and society. Through this comparative approach, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the foundational perspectives of classical economic sociology.

The development of academic disciplines is often characterised by significant paradigmatic shifts, and sociology has been particularly susceptible to changes in its theoretical and analytical orientations. These shifts may be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, they can be viewed as evidence of sociology's relative lack of disciplinary maturity compared to the natural sciences. On the other hand, they may be understood as a reflection of sociology's responsiveness to the changing intellectual, cultural, and social currents of modern society. From this perspective, transformations in sociological paradigms are not signs of instability but rather indicators of the discipline's capacity to engage with evolving social realities.

Within this context of theoretical plurality, one of the most enduring and influential debates in sociology has centred on the legacy of Karl Marx and its relationship to the sociological thought of Max Weber. More specifically, the dialogue between Marx's critique of political economy and Weber's interpretative sociology has shaped many of the central questions in twentieth-century social theory. Since the publication of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1904 (Weber, 1930 [1904–05]), scholars have continuously debated the similarities, differences, and complementarities between these two

classical thinkers. This intellectual engagement has significantly influenced the development of sociology, political economy, and the broader social sciences.

The paper examines the conceptual relationship between Marx and Weber by identifying the points at which their theoretical perspectives converge and diverge. Rather than treating their ideas as mutually exclusive, the study explores whether their respective analyses can be understood as complementary elements within a broader sociological explanation of economy and society. Although Marx and Weber share several methodological, substantive, and, to some extent, normative concerns, their mature theoretical frameworks ultimately developed in distinct directions. Consequently, an understanding of their differences requires careful attention to their underlying similarities.

Accordingly, this paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the principal concepts developed by Marx and Weber, with particular emphasis on their interpretations of capitalism, class, power, rationalisation, and social change. Before engaging in this conceptual comparison, however, the study first provides a brief historical overview of the intellectual and institutional contexts in which their ideas emerged. Situating their theories within their respective historical settings is essential for appreciating both the continuity and divergence of their contributions to classical sociological thought.

Brief Historical Overview of the Marx and Weber's Discussion:

The debate surrounding the relationship between the sociological perspectives of Karl Marx and Max Weber has persisted since Weber's own lifetime. Over the past eight decades and more, however, the nature, scope, and intensity of this discourse have undergone significant transformation. The terms of the debate have evolved in response to changing intellectual traditions, theoretical developments, and shifting priorities within the social sciences. Consequently, it is useful to briefly review the historical trajectory of this scholarly discussion before undertaking a more detailed conceptual analysis.

The early phase of the Marx–Weber debate was framed in broad and overarching terms, primarily concerned with determining whether the theoretical perspectives of the two thinkers were fundamentally incompatible or whether they could be understood as complementary approaches to the analysis of modern society. Subsequent scholarship moved beyond this binary opposition to explore more nuanced questions concerning the methodological, conceptual, and substantive similarities and differences between their respective analyses of capitalism, social stratification, power, and social change.

- (a) The protestant ethic, contra Marx, was a precondition of modern capitalism, and, relatedly, whether (b) the class–status partly views of social conflict was not superior to Marx's theory of class conflict. Third position, of Karl Lowith (1932/1982, p. 60, note 2), argue that two thinkers were in such different

“Problematic”, with such incommensurable logical and epistemological assumptions, that direct, frontal comparison was impossible.¹

During the late 1960s, the nature and emphasis of the Marx–Weber debate underwent a significant transformation. The discussion became richer and more nuanced, moving away from the earlier polarised and ideological confrontations towards a more balanced and pragmatic engagement. Rather than treating Marx and Weber as representatives of mutually exclusive theoretical traditions, scholars increasingly focused on areas of convergence and compatibility. Consequently, the objective of the debate shifted from establishing the superiority of one perspective over the other to exploring the possibilities of theoretical dialogue and mutual enrichment.

From the perspective of American sociology, this shift was particularly evident in the changing interpretation of Weber's work. The dominant functionalist reading advanced by Talcott Parsons gradually declined, while Reinhard Bendix's more historically grounded and conflict-oriented interpretation gained prominence. At the same time, the political and intellectual climate of the 1960s, shaped by movements such as the Vietnam War protests and the broader New Left, encouraged a more critical engagement with capitalism and social inequality. As a result, many Weberian scholars became less conservative and less explicitly anti-Marxist. Although political opinion later shifted towards the right, a generation of scholars had already established the foundations of what came to be known as the "Weberian Left." Influenced by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, these scholars increasingly recognised the compatibility between Weberian sociology and certain Marxist concerns regarding power, domination, and capitalist modernity.

A parallel transformation occurred within Marxist scholarship during the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than adhering rigidly to orthodox Marxism, many Marxist theorists began to engage more seriously with Weberian concepts and methodologies. Scholars have argued that Western Marxism in general, and the Frankfurt School in particular, had already begun incorporating Weberian insights into their analyses (Anderson, 1976; Kellner, 1985). While the movement among Weberian scholars was influenced largely by changing political orientations, the shift within Marxism was primarily theoretical. Nevertheless, these developments substantially narrowed the intellectual distance between the two traditions.

These theoretical developments were closely connected to broader historical transformations. Major political and economic events created what Weber described as an *elective affinity* between Marxian and Weberian approaches. Two developments were particularly significant: the changing nature of international relations, especially the experience of war, and the evolution of the global political economy. Both became central concerns for social scientists seeking to understand the dynamics of modern societies.

1 Wiley, Norbert, the Marx and Weber debate. (key issues in sociological theory ; 2)

The aftermath of the First World War generated widespread political and intellectual uncertainty throughout Europe. The conflict challenged Marxist expectations regarding the revolutionary potential of the industrial working class, as workers fought against one another in support of their respective nation-states rather than uniting in international class solidarity. Furthermore, despite the severe economic crises that followed the war, capitalist societies did not experience the socialist revolutions predicted by orthodox Marxist theory. Instead, authoritarian and fascist regimes emerged in countries such as Germany and Japan, highlighting the limitations of economic determinism in explaining political developments.

The experience of the Second World War and its aftermath further reshaped Marxist thought. The expansion of communist regimes in Eastern Europe under Soviet influence shifted scholarly attention towards the role of the state as a central agent of historical change. Increasingly, Marxist theorists recognised that the state possessed a degree of institutional autonomy that could not be fully explained through class relations alone. Simultaneously, dependency theorists and world-systems scholars, including the Frankfurt School and Immanuel Wallerstein, emphasised the importance of state power, military institutions, and international political structures in sustaining the global capitalist system and reinforcing the dominance of core states.

These developments encouraged Marxist scholars to devote greater attention not only to the state but also to culture and ideology. Unlike earlier Western Marxists, however, this renewed interest in culture was pursued with greater theoretical confidence. French Structural Marxists, particularly Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas, played a pivotal role in this transformation. Their work reconceptualised the relationship between the state, ideology, and class by arguing that bourgeois domination operates primarily through structural mechanisms rather than through direct personal control. State institutions reproduce capitalist social relations by maintaining structural conditions that favour the interests of the dominant class.

As structural approaches gained prominence, culture assumed a more significant place within Marxist analysis. Culture was no longer viewed merely as a passive reflection of the economic base but as a relatively autonomous sphere capable of shaping social relations and political institutions. Consequently, the traditional Marxian distinction between economic infrastructure and ideological superstructure became increasingly complex. The state, ideology, and culture were understood as interrelated structures that actively contribute to the reproduction of capitalist society. In this context, Weberian concepts such as class, status, and party gained increasing relevance within Marxist scholarship, reflecting a growing recognition that social inequality cannot be adequately explained through economic class alone.

In conclusion, contemporary debates between Marx and Weber have increasingly converged around a shared conceptual terrain. Although important theoretical disagreements remain concerning the sources of social order, power, and inequality, the intellectual distance separating the two traditions has diminished considerably. Modern scholarship no longer views Marxism and Weberian sociology as fundamentally incompatible paradigms. Instead, they are

increasingly recognised as complementary perspectives that together provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of capitalism, modernity, and social transformation.

Weber Theory of Capitalism in Terms of ‘Rationalisation’:

There is little doubt that Germany has produced a disproportionately large number of influential scholars since the Reformation, making remarkable contributions across numerous fields of knowledge. Sociology, in particular, has benefited significantly from this rich intellectual tradition. Interestingly, periods of political upheaval, war, and economic crisis did not diminish the development of German social thought; rather, these conditions often stimulated profound intellectual reflection and the emergence of pioneering sociological theories. Among the distinguished figures of this tradition, Max Weber (1864–1920) occupies a pre-eminent position. Widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, Weber made enduring contributions to the understanding of social action, bureaucracy, authority, religion, capitalism, and the process of rationalisation. His work continues to exert a profound influence on contemporary sociological theory and research.

Although the issues of capitalism and socialism were not the central focus of Max Weber's sociological inquiry, particularly when compared with his major themes of rationalisation, bureaucracy, authority, and charismatic leadership, the "social question" remained a persistent concern throughout his intellectual career. Weber's analysis of modern society was fundamentally concerned with understanding the institutional and cultural conditions that shaped the development of capitalism and its consequences for social organisation. While he critically examined the inequalities and tensions generated by capitalist society, he remained sceptical of socialism as a viable alternative. Weber argued that the market economy and the relatively free operation of market forces constituted essential foundations of individual freedom, economic efficiency, and rational organisation. In his view, modern capitalism, despite its contradictions, provided the institutional framework within which rational economic action and bureaucratic administration could most effectively develop.²

Max Weber had many intellectual interests, and there has been considerable debate over the question of what constitutes the central theme of his life work. Besides treating the origins of capitalism, Weber dealt extensively with the nature of modernity and of rationality (Tenbruck, 1975; Kalberg, 1979; 1980; Seidman, 1980), and with politics, methodology, and various substantive areas of sociology. This is his mature theory of the development of capitalism, found in his last work (1961), *General Economic History*. This is ironic because Weber's (1930) first major work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, has long been the most famous of all, the argument that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination gave the psychological impetus for rationalized, entrepreneurial capitalism only a fragment of Weber's

² The British journal of sociology, vol. 33, No. 2 (jun.,1982) pp.151-171

full theory. Debate about the validity of this part of Weber's theory has tended to obscure the more fundamental historical and institutional theory which he presented in his later works, The so-called "Weber thesis," as thus isolated, has been taken to be essentially idealist. Weber (1930:90) defines his purpose in *The Protestant Ethic* as "a contribution to the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history." He (1930:183) polemically remarks against the Marxists that he does not intend to replace a one-sided materialism with its opposite, but his correcting of the balance sheet in this work concentrates largely on ideal factors. The germ of Weber's institutional theory of capitalism can also be found in *The Protestant Ethic* (1930:58, 76).³

The tone of early interpretation, it can be said, tended to be said by person directly interest in the specific historical question of Weber's most immediate concern, the development of family- firm type of "capitalistic" business enterprise in western Europe from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, and within the frame work paramount problems seemed to concern the balance between "ideal" and "material" factor in historical change. This trend was partly invited by the Weber himself speaking of "one side of the causal chain".

In this connection relatively little attention was given to the question of what of what was meant by the system of rational "bourgeois capitalism" which Weber made the focus of his analytical and explanatory attention. For understandable reason he, like others, emphasized profit making business enterprise, but he was careful to point out that it was not orientation to profit alone which was crucial criterion, but such orientation in the context of careful, systematic rational planning and discipline, which concern profit making with "bureaucratic" organization of the economy and with high technology which eventually, for the most part he wrote, developed a scientific base.⁴ Thus Parsons (1963; 1967) treats these works as extending the early Weber thesis from Protestantism to Christianity in general, describing an evolution of religious ideas and their accompanying motivational propensities from ancient Judaism up through the secularized achievement culture of the modern United States. From these works, and from (1968) *Part II of Economy and Society*, it is possible to pull out an extensive picture of institutional factors which Weber includes in his overall theory of capitalism. But *Economy and Society* is organized encyclopaedically, by analytically defined topics, and does not pull together the theory as a whole. There is only one place in Weber's works where he brings together the full theory of capitalism as a historical dynamic. This is in the *General Economic History*, and, especially, in the 70-page section comprising *Part IV* of that work. These lectures, delivered in the winter and spring of 1919-20, before Weber's death that summer, are Weber's last word on the subject of capitalism. However, one important change in the *General Economic History* is that Weber pays a good deal more attention to Marxian themes than

³ The list of institutional characteristics given on pp.21-25 of the English language of *The protestant Ethic* (1930)

⁴ Max Weber (*The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*) translated by TALCOTT PARSONS professor o sociology, Harvard University.

previously. This is a significant difference from the anti-Marxist comments scattered through *The Protestant Ethic* (e.g., pp. 55-56, 61, 90-91, 183). In the *General Economic History*, Weber reduces the ideal factor to a relatively small place in his overall scheme. During this same period, to be sure, Weber was preparing a new introduction and footnotes for the reissue of *The Protestant Ethic* among his collected religious writings, in which he defended his original thesis about Calvinism. But his claims for its importance in the overall scheme of things were not large, and the well-rounded model which he presents in *General Economic History* does not even mention the doctrine of predestination. Instead, what we find is a predominantly institutional theory, in which religious organization plays a key role in the rise of modern capitalism but especially in conjunction with particular forms of political organization.

Weber's model continues to offer a more sophisticated basis for a theory of capitalism than any of the rival theories of today. I put forward this formalization of Weber's mature theory, not merely as an appreciation of one of the classic works of the past, but to make clear the high-water mark of sociological theory about capitalism. Weber's last theory is not the last word on the subject of the rise of capitalism, but if we are to surpass it, it is the high point from which we ought to build within the realm of religious solutions to the problem of suffering. It is clear that Weber himself used the term "rationalism" in a number of different senses.⁵ But for his institutional theory of capitalist development, there is only one sense that need concern us. The "rational capitalistic establishment," says Weber (1961:207), "is one with capital accounting, that is, an establishment which determines its income yielding power by calculation according to the methods of modern bookkeeping and the striking of a balance." The key term is calculability; it occurs over and over again in those pages. What is distinctive about modern, large-scale, "rational" capitalism-in contrast to earlier, partial forms-is that it is methodical and predictable, reducing all areas of production and distribution as much as possible to a routine. This is also Weber's criterion for calling bureaucracy the most "rational" form of organization.

Capitalism, says Weber is the provision of human needs by the method of enterprise, which is to say, by private businesses seeking profit. It is exchange carried out for positive gain, rather than forced contributions or traditionally fixed gifts or trades. Like all of Weber's categories, capitalism is an analytical concept; capitalism can be found as part of many historical economies, as far back as ancient Babylon. It became the indispensable form for the provision of everyday wants only in Western Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century. For this large-scale and economically predominant capitalism, the key is the "rational permanent enterprise" characterized by "rational capital accounting".

⁵ In Part I of *Economy and Society* (written 1918-20), Weber distinguishes formal and substantive rationality of economic action (1968:85- In "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" (written 1913), Weber (1946:293-4) defines three different types of rationalism: (1) a systematic world view based on precise, abstract concepts; (2) practical means-ends calculations; (3) a systematic method, including that of magic or prayer. In *The Protestant Ethic* (1904-5), Weber (1930:76-78) attacks the notion that the spirit of capitalism is "part of the development of rationalism as a whole,"

According to his argument components of "rationalized" capitalism are as follows: There must be private appropriation of all the means of production, and their concentration under the control of entrepreneurs. Land, buildings, machinery, and materials must all be assembled under a common management, so that decisions about their acquisition and use can be calculated with maximal efficiency. All these factors must be subject to sale as private goods on an open market. This development reaches its maximal scope when all such property rights are represented by commercial instruments, especially shares in ownership which are themselves negotiable in a stock market. Within this enterprise, capital accounting is optimized by a technology which is "reduced to calculation to the largest possible degree" (1961:208). It is in this sense that mechanization is most significant for the organization of large-scale capitalism.

Marxian Interpretation of Bourgeois-Capitalist World in Terms of 'Self-Alienation'

For Karl Marx, the economic manifestation of human alienation is embodied in the **commodity**, which represents the commodification of social life under capitalism. In Marx's analysis, the commodity is not merely one type of object among many; rather, it constitutes the fundamental social form through which wealth is produced, exchanged, and experienced in capitalist society. The **commodity form** expresses the transformation of both material objects and human labour into marketable entities whose value is determined primarily through exchange. Consequently, social relations between individuals increasingly assume the appearance of relations between commodities, obscuring the human labour that creates them.

Marx argues that the commodity form is the principal expression of alienation in capitalist society. It alienates individuals not only from the products of their labour but also from the labour process, from their fellow human beings, and ultimately from their own human potential. In this sense, commodities embody the reification of social relations, whereby human capacities and relationships are objectified and subordinated to the logic of the market. Recognising the centrality of the commodity to capitalist production, Marx begins *Capital* (1867) with a detailed analysis of the commodity, treating it as the elementary unit through which the fundamental contradictions and dynamics of the capitalist mode of production can be understood. Through this analysis, Marx demonstrates that the commodity is not simply an economic object but the foundational social category of capitalist society, revealing the structural processes of exploitation, alienation, and commodity fetishism.

The criticism of society, and hence the basic human significance of this economic analysis, finds direct expression in capital only in the marginal comments and footnotes, but it emerges clearly in Marx's article on the debate in the Rhenish Diet on the proposed legislation against thieves of wood.⁶ This article embodies the first, exemplary revelation of that

⁶ Marx's article, 'Debatten uber das Holzdiebstahlgesetz' was published in October –november 1842 and printed in MEGA 1/11/[Ends]

fundamental inversion of means and ends of object and man which involves the alienation of man his dispossession in favour of the thing. To regard oneself as something 'other' and 'foreign', this supreme form of externalisation, is what Marx, in his doctoral dissertation, call 'materialism' while referring to himself as an 'idealist' who wanted to overcome this alienation. The externalisation of man in favour of thing is self-alienation, because things are essentially there for human beings while human beings are ends in themselves.⁷

The same question as is posed in Marx's article on thefts of wood also appears in *The German Ideology*, although it is formulated in a different way. Here too, Marx asked why man are related in an 'alien' fashion to their own products, so that they no longer control their 'mode of interaction', their interrelations become reified against themselves and their own life powers acquire dominance over them. How is it that within the involuntary transformation of personal interest into class interest that personal behaviour of the individual must be reified and alienated, and at that same time emerges as an independent power beyond human control? ⁸

Although Marx believed that there is an inherent relation between labour and human nature, he thought that this relation is perverted by capitalism, he call this perverted relation *alienation*. This discussion of Marx concept of human nature and of alienation is derived from Marx's early work, even though he shied away from such a heavily philosophical term later in his work on. The nature of capitalist society, alienation remained one of his main concerns (Barbalet, 1983:95)

Marx analysed the peculiar from that our relation to our own labour has taken under capitalism. We no longer see our labour as an expression of our purpose. There are no objectivities instead, we labour in accordance with the purpose of the capitalist who has hired us and pays us. Rather than being an end in itself an expression of capabilities – labour in capitalism is reduced to a means to an end earning money. Because our labour is not our own, it no longer transforms us. Instead we are alienated from our labour and therefore alienated from our true human nature. Although it is individual who feels alienated in capitalist society. Marx's basic analytic concern was with the structures of capitalism that cause this alienation. Marx uses the concept of alienation to reveal the devastating effect of capitalist production of human beings and on society. Of crucial significant here is the two class system in which the capitalist employ the workers and means of production as well ultimate products. In order to survive, workers are force to sell their labour to capitalist. This is the sociological basis of alienation. As a result , people feel free active only their animal function – eating, drinking, procreating while in the essentially process of labour, they no longer feel themselves to be anything but animal. What animal become human, and what is human become animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions, but separated

⁷ Max Weber an Karl Marx, Karl Lowth, with a new preface by Bryan s. turner published in 1993.

⁸ German ideology pt III, 'saint max'

from the sphere of all other human activity and turned to sole and ultimate ends, they are animal functions.

However, from Marxian perspective alienation can be seen as having four basic components. First, the workers in capitalist society are alienated from their *productive activity*. Workers do not produce objects according to their own ideas or to directly their own needs, instead, they work for capitalists, who pay them a subsistence wage in return for the right to use the workers in any way they see fit, because productive activity belongs to the capitalists. Because they decided what is to be done with it. We can say that workers are alienated from that activity.

Secondly, the workers are alienated not only from productivity force activities, but also from the object of those activities *the product*, the product of their labour does not belongs to the workers. Instead, the product belongs to the capitalists. Who may use it in any way they wish, because the product is the capitalist's private property. "Private property is thus the product, the result, and the necessary consequences of alienated labour" capitalist will use his or her ownership in order to sell the product for profit.

Thirdly, workers in the capitalist society are alienated from their fellow workers. Marx's assumption was that people basically need and want to work cooperatively in order to appropriate from the nature what they require to survive. But in capitalism this cooperation is disrupted, and the people, often stranger, are force to work side by side for the capitalist. Even if the workers on the assembly line close friends, nature of the technology makes for a great deal of isolation. Here is the way one worker describes his social situation on the assembly line.

Finally, the most generally, workers in capitalist society are alienated from their own *human potential*. Instead of work being the transformation and fulfilment of our human nature, work is where he feel least human, least ourselves, individuals perform less and less human beings as they are reduced in their work to machines. Even smile and greeting are programmed and scripted. Consciousness is numbed and, ultimately, destroyed as relation with other humans and with nature is progressively controlled. The result is a mass of people who are unable to express their essential human qualities, a mass of alienated workers.⁹

Alienation is an example of the sort of contradiction that Marx's dialectical approach focused on. There is a real contradiction between our human nature which is defined and transformed by labour and the actual social conditions of our labour under capitalism. What Marx wanted to stress is that this contradiction cannot be resolved merely in thought. We are not any less alienated because we identified with our employer or with the things that our

⁹ Sociology theory international Sixth Edition George Ritzer university of Maryland.

employer or with the things that our wages can purchase. Indeed, these things are a symptom of our alienation, which can be changed.

Marx and Weber Comparison

Karl Marx and Max Weber, two of the most influential classical social theorists, devoted considerable attention to understanding the emergence, development, functioning, and future trajectory of capitalism. Although both sought to explain the nature of capitalist society, they arrived at markedly different conclusions based on distinct theoretical assumptions and analytical frameworks. At first glance, it may appear paradoxical that two scholars examining the same social and economic system could produce such divergent interpretations. This apparent contradiction has often led to the characterisation of Marx and Weber as representatives of two fundamentally opposing traditions in modern social thought.

A common, though overly simplistic, distinction portrays Marx as a materialist and Weber as an idealist. Such a characterisation, however, fails to capture the complexity of their intellectual traditions. Marx's analysis is rooted in dialectical and historical materialism, drawing heavily on Hegelian dialectics while emphasising the primacy of material conditions and class relations in shaping historical development. Weber, by contrast, developed an interpretative sociology (*Verstehen*) influenced by Neo-Kantian philosophy, while simultaneously grounding his analyses in rigorous historical and comparative inquiry. Although their methodological orientations differ significantly, both theorists addressed a common sociological concern: the relationship between human agency and the structural conditions that shape social life. More specifically, both sought to understand the possibilities for individual freedom, meaningful social action, and the constraints imposed by the institutional organisation of modern society.

Recognising these shared concerns, several contemporary historians and social theorists have attempted to reconcile elements of Marxian and Weberian thought rather than treating them as mutually exclusive traditions. For example, E. J. Hobsbawm, echoing George Lichtheim, argued that Weber's sociological analyses of religion, capitalism, and non-Western societies should not be regarded as alternatives to Marx's theory but rather as perspectives that either extend or complement the Marxian framework. Similarly, Georg Lukács and Jürgen Habermas sought, albeit in different ways, to integrate Marx's critique of capitalist production with Weber's analysis of bureaucracy and rationalisation in order to develop a more comprehensive critique of modern capitalist and bureaucratic societies.

Despite these areas of convergence, important theoretical differences remain. Both Marx and Weber recognised the emergence of formally free labour as a defining characteristic of modern capitalism; however, they interpreted its significance in fundamentally different ways. For Marx, wage labour represents a form of exploitation rooted in the capitalist mode of production, where workers are compelled to sell their labour power, resulting in alienation and class domination. Weber, in contrast, viewed formally free labour as an essential component of

rational capitalism, embedded within broader processes of legal rationality, bureaucratic organisation, and the rationalisation of economic life. Thus, while both theorists analysed the same historical phenomenon, they situated it within different explanatory frameworks, leading to contrasting interpretations of the origins, dynamics, and consequences of modern capitalism.

This comparison demonstrates that Marx and Weber should not be understood merely as intellectual opponents but as complementary classical theorists whose distinct perspectives collectively provide a richer understanding of capitalism, modernity, and the relationship between economy and society.

The key to this comparison is to be found in Lowith's who claim that both thinkers were preoccupied above all with the question of the cultural significance and consequences of modern western capitalism, and in his attribution of differences between them to the influence of contrasting philosophical anthropological conceptions, expressed by Weber in the idea of 'rationalisation' and by Marx in the idea of 'alienation' as Lowith notes at the beginning of his essay, his comparison involve three- way relation, with himself as the third term. His lifelong preoccupation with Heidegger's existential ontology of human existence led him naturally to interpret Marx and Weber as being centrally concerned with the human condition; not general, as with much existentialist writing, but under capitalism. In so doing, he provided as important corrective to those view which saw Marx as either a political polemicist or a purely 'scientific' analyst of the laws of motion of capitalism, and which took Weber at the face value judgements and speculative philosophy. This was, Lowith claims, a preoccupation with the human emancipation, seen by weber as a matter of rescuing some ultimate human dignity in the face of rationalisation and Marx as the cause of the proletariat, representing the possibility of general human emancipation, it was this passion in their critical attitude and in the impulse behind their scientific work that assured their objectivity. The principle of comparison is not arbitrary but central to the substance to their work, than this single question must emerge again and again in the thematically different works of Marx and Weber.

I have therefore the following task: to set out the differences and similarities in Marx's and Weber's idea of man as the basis of economy and society. However, such comparison cannot be lead to agreement, for as long as this worldly life is 'based on itself and is understood in its own term, 'it can only know 'the impossibility of decision in the combat between the ultimate conceivable orientations to life'¹⁰. I now endeavour to make clear of the differences and the similarities between the two with the prime focus on capitalism.

Marx and Weber 'Differences'

Differences between Marx and Weber no doubt accounts in large measure for the very fates that befell their ideas. Marx's social theory become interwoven with the development of

¹⁰ Weber, 'science as a vocation', in Gerth and mills, 1947, p. 152.

the most important political movement of modern times and had a profound political influence, though often in the forms which would perhaps have surprised and even dismayed him. Weber's though, on the contrary, seems to have had little political and cultural effect. It may have given some encouragement to imperialist view among the German middle class, but it was hardly the major influence in that sphere. On the other side it cannot be said to have promoted a politically effective liberal outlook, perhaps because of Weber's own contradictory stance and his underlying pessimism, which made him as Mommsen says, 'a liberal in despair'. Weber's intellectual legacy become largely confined within the academic discipline of sociology and partly through the kind of misunderstanding of it that Lowith emphasises, its connections with major political and cultural movements were almost completely served. Another crucial difference from Marx, of course, is that Weber regards neither the economy nor the society as determinative of all other social phenomena. If anything, the polity, or more specifically, the power struggle between a political leaders and his administrative staff, is most influential (E&S 264).¹¹ Other factors are of importance insofar as they are used to advance the political power of an individual, status group, social class, political party, or state. Historical change is caused by the power struggle between these actors, and it is a struggle of which the people involved are not unaware.

Marx versus Weber has long been a favourite fixture among academics - or, to be more precise, Weber has been a favourite stick with which to beat Marxists: Marx is a reductionist, an economic determinist; Weber has a more sophisticated understanding of multiple causes, the autonomy of ideology and politics; Marx's view of history is teleological and Eurocentric, Weber's more attuned to the variability and complexity of human culture and historical patterns. Weber is the greater sociologist and a better historian because, where Marx over systematizes, reducing all cultural and historical complexities to a single cause and one unilinear historical process, Weber, with his methodology of 'ideal types', acknowledges complexity and multi-causality even as he subjects them to some kind of conceptual order. Yet is it really so? Or should the shoe be on the other foot? In what follows, it will be argued that it is Weber, not Marx, who looked at the world through the prism of a unilinear, teleological and Eurocentric conception of history, which Marx had done more than any other Western thinker to dislodge. Far from advancing social theory beyond the alleged crudities of a Marxist determinism, Weber reverted to a pre-Marxist teleology, in which all history is a drive though sometimes, perhaps more often than not, thwarted – toward capitalism, where the capitalist destination is always prefigured in the movements of history, and where the differences among various social forms have to do with the ways in which they encourage or obstruct that single historical drive.¹²

¹¹ Weber, "Sociological Categories of Economic Action," in E&S, vol. 1, pt. I, ch. II, sec. 1-14, pp. 63-113.

¹² Democracy against capitalism, Wood Meiksins Ellen, pp, 146 , published in 1995,

Other differences between Marx and Weber over these political issues were clear, while also saw bourgeois capitalist world in term of self-alienation, Marx's teleology, which was the legacy of Hegel's secularised Christians theology, presented the historical role of the proletariat in term of the resolution of the contradictions of bourgeois society. The proletarian victory would bring to an end of exploitation of human labour, the divisions of the private and the public realm, and the alienation of human beings. Marx's utopian vision of the end of history is, as Lowith argues, a powerful illustration of the chiliastic imagination which down the centuries has challenged the permanency of existing social relation, whereas as Weber's existential solution was individualistic, inward and despairing, Marx's solution was collectivist, external and hopeful, however, we have to keep in mind that Marx's own views on 'man's self-alienation' were eventually transformed into 'vulgar Marxism' in which the economic base mechanically determines the superstructure, and as Lowith pointed out, 'this is how Weber also regarded Marxism and combated it as dogmatically economic historical materialism'(Lowith 1982:68).¹³

Marx and Weber 'Similarities'

There is a clear tradition that opposes Weber against Marx; there has been a line of interpretations that brings out similarities and overlaps. However, it was Lowith who emphasized the importance of comparing rationalization in Weber with alienation in Marx, because rationalisation involves the separation of the individual from control over the means of knowledge and production, we can argue that Marx's alienation in some respects is merely a subtype of this general rationalisation process.

Lowith is perhaps best seen, then, as deliberately going beyond Weber's explicit philosophy of science to develop a more reflective and dialectical conception of science in which the knowledge of the world furnished by modern science is itself conditioned by the nature of the modern capitalist world. This would bring Weber closer to Marx, at least on a reading of Marx which sees him as committed both to a kind of philosophical realism and to a dialectical conception express, for example, in his concept of abstract labour as something which made its way from reality into the textbooks.

Despite this obvious lack of broad influence, Weber life and his fragmentary work nevertheless encompass the totality of our time. Like Marx, he assimilated enormous masses of scientific material and he followed the political events of his day with the same passion. Both Marx and Weber had at their command the gift of demagogic style and action, yet both have also written almost unreadable works, whose lines of thought seem often to peter out, being overburdened with supportive material and footnotes. With extravagant and remorseless care, Weber follows up the theories of obscure contemporary mediocrities, while Marx smokes out the hornets' nest of the holy family. Both Marx and Weber piles scientific acerbity and personal animus upon seeming trivialities; short articles grow into unfinished books. Thus the

¹³ Max Weber and Karl Marx, Karl Lowith, with a new preface by Bryan S. Turner pp. 24,

question arises; what is the vital impulse behind such vehemence, which is aimed equally at an everyday legal case, an academic appointment, or a book review _ or at the future of Germany? Or invested equally in quarrel with the Rhenish censorship or with Herr Vogt, or brought to bear on Lassalle and Bakunin and the fate of the international Proletariat.

The answer is clearly that what was at issue in each case was a totality which was therefore always the same. For Weber this was the rescuing of an ultimate human dignity; for Marx it was the cause of the proletariat. For both it was therefore something akin to human emancipation. Thus, both Marx and Weber were essentially in sociologists, namely, philosophical sociologist; not because they founded any particular 'social philosophy', but because they in fact, following the basic principle of their work in the face of the actual problems of our human existence, questioned the totality of the contemporary life situation under the rubric of capitalism. Both provide Marx directly and Weber indirectly a critical analysis of modern man within bourgeois-capitalist economy, based on the recognition that the 'economy' has become human 'destiny'. After considering the universal developmental trend of western culture, Weber pauses to observe: thus it is also with the most fateful force in modern life: capitalism. Similarly Marx poses the question in the German ideology: How it is that commerce, which in itself is nothing more than the exchange of particular products between various individuals and countries, dominates the entire world relation who likes fate in antiquity, hovers over the earth and with its invisible hand creates and destroys empires and people.

Marx promptly answers his own question by indicating the way in which men must regain control over the manner of their mutual relations. Marx proposes a therapy while Weber has only a 'diagnosis'. Consequently, the critique of the contemporary world of Marx and Weber can only be brought out if one discounts the apparently specialised character of their own scientific works.

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