



---

Inequality and Social Structure: A Comparison of Marx and Weber

Author(s): Reinhard Bendix

Source: *American Sociological Review*, Apr., 1974, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Apr., 1974), pp. 149-161

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2094228>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*American Sociological Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Sociological Review*

JSTOR

# AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

APRIL, 1974

VOLUME 39, NO. 2

## INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE: A COMPARISON OF MARX AND WEBER\*

REINHARD BENDIX

*University of California, Berkeley*

American Sociological Review 1974, Vol. 39 (April): 149-61

*Marx and Weber devoted little space to the discussion of class, but the importance of that theme in their work is well known. The present paper contrasts the Marxian argument concerning the foundation of class in the organization of production with Weber's greater emphasis upon status-differences and organized collective action. The discussion distinguishes as Marx and Weber did between modern and pre-modern types of inequality and society. The paper does not attempt to go beyond a comparison between two classic writers.*

In our world, inequality among men is considered an aspect of social organization, not a divinely ordained attribute of the human condition. Few still believe in transcendental justifications of inequality. Goodness and talent too often go unrewarded and those who carry the burden of poverty too often also suffer the stigma of social discrimination. Inequalities have changed over time, and we can infer that particular inequalities are alterable. Yet this awareness of change does not console or guide us. Unlike the theologians of old or the pioneers of social thought in the nineteenth century, we do not have a theory of social structure and inequality.

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59) wrote that the growth of equality was providential. "It may be God's will," he suggested in a letter, "to spread a moderate amount of happiness over all men, instead of heaping a large sum upon a few by allowing only a small minority to approach perfection." In the aristocratic societies of the past this minority had enjoyed inherited privileges. The French revolution had destroyed this aspect of in-

equality by instituting an equality of legal rights. In de Tocqueville's eyes, the revolution was a further step in the great rise of equality which had characterized European history for centuries. He recognized that legal equality existed side by side with vast differences between rich and poor. But his attention was focussed on the contrast between the brilliant society of the past, based on inherited privilege, and the emerging society, based on equal rights, in which cultural achievements would be modest. On balance, he preferred the latter as long as order and morality were ensured. De Tocqueville feared the perpetuation of revolutionary conditions. For where equal rights are proclaimed, the lines dividing authority from tyranny and liberty from license could be so blurred that an "undisciplined and depraved democracy would result." De Tocqueville had no explanatory model. But by assessing sentiments and moral qualities he anticipated certain cultural aspects of democratic institutions.

As a younger contemporary of de Tocqueville's, Karl Marx (1818-83) gave more emphasis to the scientific character of his materialist philosophy. Rejecting the tradition of German idealism, he held that in the long run, ideas and institutions are determined by the material conditions under which men work. He allowed that in the short run history

\*Completion of this study was facilitated by Grant GS - 31730X of the National Science Foundation, at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J.

For critical and editorial suggestions, I am indebted to Erik Bendix.

was affected by "accidents" and by ideas. But this reservation did not diminish his confidence in predictions based on "scientific" analysis. An understanding of the organization of production would provide the major clue to the development of society. Hence Marx undertook an economic analysis of capitalism. For the economically most advanced countries, Marx predicted a polarization between capitalists and workers that would eventually lead to a proletarian revolution and a reorganization of society. And this prediction seemed buttressed by Marx's great insights into the culture of capitalist societies.

It is puzzling that de Tocqueville so often proved right although his methods were impressionistic, while Marx's central proposition proved wrong although his methods were scholarly. For the study of inequality and social structure it is useful to learn where these earlier analyses went right or wrong.

My discussion distinguishes between modern and pre-modern history (broadly defined by the transition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and will provide some warrant for making that distinction. Marx's theory dealt primarily with the organization of production as the basis of social classes in a capitalist society. I shall contrast his argument with that of Max Weber. Both writers studied inequality with a view to status-differences and organized collective action, though for reasons to be indicated below, Weber gave closer attention to these topics. In the second part, I deal with inequality as a force in pre-modern history. I do so to make clear, as Marx and Weber did, that the types of inequality most familiar to us do not pertain to that earlier period and hence are of limited historical applicability. The paper concludes with some programmatic guidelines for analyzing the transition between pre-modern and modern social structures.

#### *A. Inequality as a Force in Modern History*

##### *Class and Status*

More than a century has passed since Marx and Engels predicted the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Marx presupposed a society adapted to the nation-state. Capitalists and workers would become nationwide classes; the dynamics of a capitalist economy would eradicate all social divisions that inter-

fered with that development. The study of the emerging working class in England suggested the force of large and growing numbers. Through massive deprivations and the increasing intensity of class conflicts the workers would emerge as a major agent of historical change. Marx saw class conflicts under capitalism as the first opportunity for correct historical prediction. And he believed that the coming revolution would end the exploitation of man by man. Thus, analysis, or science, and the strength of numbers were on the side of equity and justice and would bring about the reorganization of society (Tucker, 1961: *passim*).

Marx's approach may be seen as a theory of group-formation. In his view, ruling classes are aware of their common interests and have the organizational means to promote them, while oppressed classes still seek to achieve class consciousness and organizational cohesion. Classes such as feudal landlords and capitalist entrepreneurs which own the means of production, control the peasants and workers who depend on them for employment. But the influence of an owner's class is not confined to such a private exercise of economic dominance. It spills over into virtual control of government and a hegemony in the world of ideas and social institutions. The assumption is that ownership prompts the ruling classes to think alike and act in common, wherever the interests of property are at stake. Thus, in all spheres of society ownership of property is the basis for the exercise of rule.

Yet the ownership is only one basis of class and power. The other basis is deprivation. In the crowded factories of the early nineteenth century, lack of acquaintance and competing interests divided the workers amongst themselves. Although all of them lived a starkly deprived life, their common experience only engendered in each a dogged pursuit of his own interests. Marx knew that abject poverty makes men more selfish, not less. But he believed that the domination of capital created a common and bitter experience which would drive workers to develop common interests and a collective effort. Given sufficient ease of communication in the work place, classes would arise in collective reaction to a common opponent. In Marx's view, a politically conscious labor movement could only develop if workers would realize the

futility of mere union activity. Capitalists could not grant enough concessions on wages and working conditions, because they could not abandon the pursuit of their own interests. Marx's economic analysis sought to establish this scientifically; the workers, he thought, would arrive at the same conclusion through experience. Their mounting dissatisfactions would result first in the conviction that capitalism must be overthrown and eventually also in revolutionary political organization (Bendix and Lipset, 1966:8; Weber, 1968: I, 305). This emergence of labor as a political force would be aided by "bourgeois ideologists" and Communists, who articulate the common experience of labor and represent the interests of the movement as a whole (Marx and Engels, 1967: 91, 95). In sum, the situation which workers share both forms them as a class and drives them to make a collective bid for power.

In his early writings, Marx distinguished between class as a condition of social life and class as a cause of collective action, between the *fact* that classes are unequal in relation to the ownership of the means of production (*Klasse an sich*) and the *meaning* this inequality has for a class as a spur to organization and action (*Klasse für sich*). Individuals do not form a group capable of collective action merely because they have certain attributes in common (like income, occupation, etc.). Rather, groups form as individuals with common attributes acquire a collective consciousness and become capable of organized action.<sup>1</sup> Marx's prediction of a proletarian revolution rested on the thesis that capitalist society would sweep aside all interests or social ties that could hinder the formation of the two main classes. The purpose of his economic analysis was to demonstrate that necessity for the long run. And since he believed that demonstration successful, he could neglect a more detailed examination of social differentiation such as that begun in the incomplete last chapter of *Capital*, vol. III. Marx believed that in the upper strata the bourgeoisie would submerge everything of human value in the "icy waters of egotistical

calculation." For the workers, a parallel effect would be achieved by the constraints of factory production which reduced everything to a deadened uniformity. Abject degradation would destroy their family life, religious beliefs, and national characteristics (Marx and Engels, 1967: 82, 89, 92). It would be because workers had lost everything that they would rise to regain their humanity (Tucker, 1961; 113-18, and *passim*).

In Marx's view, this polarization of classes would lead to a revolution and usher in a new and more rational social order. The class struggle promotes "reason in history" to the extent that political class-interests override the "infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of labor splits labourers as well as capitalists" (Marx, 1962: III, 863). For evidence that men's basic interests divide along class lines Marx scanned the limited experience of English social history. He was convinced that the widening gap between the achievements and the possibilities of social organization would push workers into accepting his doctrines. And he looked forward to a society born of revolution in which "the process of material production" would be "consciously regulated by freely associated men" (Marx, 1936:92).

Today the prospect of a proletarian revolution has receded before the reality of other, less expected revolutions. Occurring in predominantly agricultural countries, revolutions appear now as the prelude to industrialization rather than as the result of a fully developed capitalism. Marx's effort to locate the collective force through which reason advances in history unduly narrowed his conception of the inequalities which matter even in the long run. Nationalism and citizenship, religious beliefs and ethnic loyalties, regional associations and linguistic groups have often proved stronger than proletarian class consciousness. And movements of this kind arise from just that "fragmentation of interest and rank" which, according to Marx, would be obliterated by "egotistical calculation" and the constraints of factory production. Here is one reason de Tocqueville saw further than Marx. For de Tocqueville, the sentiments and opinions of people mattered and the future thus appeared impenetrable. For Marx, these opinions were often no more than a "false consciousness" that would be eradicated by the mounting intensity of the class struggle.

<sup>1</sup> Note that Marx saw the emergence of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat in terms of a common process of class formation. Cf. Marx and Engels (1939:48-9) for a description of the rising bourgeoisie and Marx (n.d.: 145-6) for a description of the rising proletariat.

Marx's approach to the study of class was too reductionist to be successful. Nonetheless, Marx's problem is important. Property ownership and the division of labor are certainly bases for the formation of classes. The question remains under what circumstances such classes become organized groups.

Max Weber approached this question from the baseline Marx had established. *Class situations* exist wherever men are similarly situated by their "relative control over goods and skills." This control produces income, procures other goods, gains them a social position, and leads to a certain style of life. Those in a common class situation are often led to similar sentiments and ideas, but not necessarily to concerted action (Weber, 1968: I, 302). By contrast, *class organizations* occur only when an immediate economic opponent is involved, organization is technically easy (as in the factory), and clear goals are articulated by an intelligentsia (Weber, 1968: I, 305). Weber accepted Marx's reasons for the success of such organizations.

Nevertheless, Weber's approach modifies Marx's analysis in three respects. First, he denies that a common class situation will give rise to association, pointing out that many such situations result only in amorphous mass reactions. For Marx, the connection between class situation and class organization is a necessary one, arising from the "laws" of capitalist development. For Weber the connection is problematic. He treats Marx's concept of class as an ideal type, a logical construct based on observed tendencies. Second, Weber broadens Marx's concept of the economic determination of class situations. Ownership of the means of production or dependence on wage labor are important but special cases. In fact, there are a variety of property classes, commercial classes, and social classes beyond the land-labor-capital trichotomy which Marx inherited from the classical economists. Weber accepts Marx's thesis that class situations are determined economically, but he points out that these situations display the same instability as the market. For Weber class situation is ultimately market situation; such situations vary with the common experiences of individuals in response to shifting economic constellations (Weber, 1968: I, 303-5; II, 928-9). Third, Marx maintained that "bourgeois ideologists" would contribute to the political radicalization of the labor movement. He

believed that the radicalizing experience of workers and the radicalizing beliefs of ideologists are responses to the same compelling structure of capitalism. By contrast, Weber sees the responses of the people at large and of a minority of culture-carriers as divergent. It is true that the class-conscious organizations of workers "succeed most easily if they are led towards readily understood goals." But these goals "are imposed and interpreted by men outside their class (intelligentsia)."<sup>2</sup>

Weber agrees that the economic and political solidarity of workers might overcome their initial fragmentation of interests. But solidarity of this kind is weakened by religious or ethnic differences. And successful class organizations create new interests, among them a new awareness of status. The very process of organizing a class creates inequalities of status which impede concerted action on a broader front. Prestige is at least as enduring a basis of group formation as a common situation in the market. Weber speaks of a social order in which status is an "effective claim to social esteem," founded upon lifestyle, formal education, heredity or occupation. Typically, the circle of social equals is defined by means of social discrimination. Marriage and hospitality are confined to that circle and only certain forms of acquisition and employment are considered socially acceptable (Weber, 1968: I, 305-6).

In discriminating against "outsiders," status groups curtail the free operation of the market. For centuries, aristocracies prevented commoners from acquiring land. On occasion this practice required aristocrats to retain their land when it would have been more profitable to sell it to some wealthy bourgeois. Land was bound up with the aristocratic way of life and remained a symbol of status long after its economic profitability had

<sup>2</sup> Weber's point (1968: I, 305) is already apparent in Marx and Engels, though it is rather awkward from the standpoint of Marxian theory. See Marx and Engels (1967:91) where the authors refer to "bourgeois ideologists" who go over to the proletariat and comprehend the historical movement as a whole. The authors stress (1967: 95-6) the role of communists as a vanguard of the proletariat, but their specification reads like a catalogue of differences between intellectual preoccupations and workday experience. Against Weber, Marx and Engels would have insisted that the intellectual articulation is already preformed in the common class experience.

declined. Analogous considerations apply to status-groups based on race, language, locality, or religion. Status groups endure as long as social honor is preferred to economic advantage, when a choice between them has to be made.

The inequalities of class and of status may be summarized as follows. *Classes arise out of common economic interests.* Classes based on the ownership of property or on deprivation in a common workplace are obvious examples. Marx understood that status distinctions would hinder the solidarity of classes, but he examined such distinctions only in his historical writings. He was convinced that his economic analysis had laid bare the overriding constraints of the class struggle and hence of the "historical movement as a whole." By contrast, *status groups are rooted in family experience.* Before the individual reaches maturity, he has participated in his family's claim to social prestige, its occupational subculture and educational level. Even in the absence of concerted action, families share a style of life and similar attitudes. Classes without organization achieve nothing. But families in the same status-situation need not communicate and organize in order to discriminate against people they consider inferior. Weber understood that their solidarity against outsiders may remain intact even when they are divided by intense rivalries.

The common element in classes and status-groups is not just the pursuit of self-interest. Both Marx and Weber saw that "self-interest" without ideas explains little. They were both concerned with man's quest for mastery, which unwittingly prompts *homo economicus* to be involved with ideas and *homo hierarchicus* (Dumont, 1972) with gain. But Marx thought that in the long run ownership of the means of production would prove the decisive determinant, and Weber did not. The difference becomes manifest in the contrast between evolutionism and a cyclical theory of change. For analytical purposes Weber thought it convenient to define classes and status-groups in terms that are mutually exclusive. Where market mechanisms predominate, personal and familial distinctions of status are discounted. Where considerations of prestige predominate, economically advantageous activities are often stigmatized. This extrapolation of class- or status-oriented actions leads to a model of social change.

When the bases of the acquisition and distribution of goods are relatively stable, stratification by status is favored. Every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground. Epochs and countries in which the naked class situation is of predominant significance are regularly the periods of technical and economic transformations. And every slowing down of the change in economic stratification leads, in due course, to the growth of status structures and makes for a resuscitation of the important role of social honor (Weber, 1968: II, 938).

But these tendencies are simple only to the degree that historical change approximates the logic of ideal types. Such approximation is seldom close. The stability of status-stratification is always exposed to the instabilities of economic change and social mobility; and men are always interested in arresting these instabilities by status distinctions which help them fortify the economic advantages they have won. By assuming that class- or status-oriented behavior prevails only for a time, Weber suggests a model of alternating tendencies without predicting a final outcome. Note the contrast with Marx, who considered economic determinants decisive in the long run and on that basis predicted the final overthrow of capitalism.

In a sense, Weber systematizes de Tocqueville's impressionistic insights. By putting status-groups on a par with social classes, and by seeing every group as a part of both the social and the economic order, Weber eliminates Marx's reductionism. Groups are no longer seen as the inevitable by-product of economic organization. Rather, they are formed by common economic interests, a shared style of life, and an exclusion of outsiders meant to improve the group's life-chances. Individuals do not develop a consciousness of their community merely because they live under similar conditions. A common consciousness and collective organization must be developed deliberately. Indeed, in Weber's view, groups are formed as readily from common ideas leading to common economic interests, as they are the other way around.

This consideration goes beyond the com-

parison developed so far. Marx viewed all culture as a dependent variable, because his theory of human nature made the necessary conditions of existence the ultimate historical determinant. Accordingly, all ideas reflect and "refract" the interests of classes like capitalists or workers, not the interests of intellectuals themselves. But culture has material conditions of its own: a transformation of intellectual life occurred along with colonial expansion, industrialization, and the emergence of the modern state. The invention of printing, the bureaucratization of government, the increased importance of formal schooling, and the emergence of a market for intellectual products are aspects of that transformation. In modern societies, intellectuals constitute a social group attached to the "material conditions of cultural production"; and these conditions allow for an extraordinary degree of mental and artistic experimentation, both in free-lance work and in the universities (Shils, 1972: Chpts. 4, 7, 8, 11, 17). But such freedom goes together with alienation. In the United States, one writer has complained that lack of interference with writers only indicates the official indifference to matters of literary interest. In the Soviet Union, Osip Mandelstam observed that where men are sent to labor camps merely for writing a poem, poetry is power. To be sure, the work of intellectuals may also be coopted by the "powers" (Shils) in universities and other organizations. But whether formally free or institutionalized, modern intellectual life tends to form cliques and schools of thought or style. And on that basis, distinctions of class and status are formed among intellectuals which are at some remove from analogous distinctions in the larger society.

#### *Organized Action*

The distinction between classes and status-groups invites the question of how the two are related. One answer is that in practice economic interest and the quest for prestige tend to reinforce each other. And this statement applies at all levels of the social structure.

Both classes and status-groups endeavor to maintain or improve their opportunities in society. But equally, mere possession of goods

satisfies no one. Everyone wants to be held in high regard by those whose judgment he values. Wealthy persons seek prestige for themselves and future generations. Those who have little or nothing still pride themselves on their good name in the community. Even deviants or outcasts want to be held in high regard in terms of their own standards. At the same time, prestige or a good name are not enough. At some social levels, wealth is needed to make prestige more secure and luxury becomes a manifestation of both. At other levels, possessions have the more modest function of confirming status and probity within the community. Also, conspicuous consumption goods may add to the prestige of an individual among those for whose judgment he cares. Although wealth and prestige may exist separately, there is a widespread desire to improve one's chances in life by combining them.

There is also a built-in limit to that improvement, at any rate in so far as wealth and prestige depend on qualifications of some kind. Once acquired, any qualification imposes a limit to further mobility by means of other qualifications. For learning, experience and skills represent an investment of resources which the individual will be loath to discount the older he gets. A forty-year-old carpenter will not readily abandon his skill for learning another trade which would require that he put himself at the bottom of another skill-hierarchy, even if that other trade promises higher rewards eventually. The same goes for qualifications of all kinds, including academic ones. Also, as we advance in age, we develop a more intense interest in preserving the social and economic value of the investment we have made in the skills acquired already. All qualifications thus represent cumulative and increasingly irreversible commitments to an occupational way of life with its rewards and liabilities—perhaps the most fundamental reason for the persistence of class- and status-differences.

Group-interests cluster around the defense of such "occupational investments" and facilitate organized actions. Probably, monopolistic organizations are the most common method of preserving or increasing the economic and social life-chances of any group.

When the number of competitors increases in relation to the profit span, the participants become interested in curbing competition. Usually one group of competitors takes some externally identifiable characteristic of another group of (actual or potential) competitors — race, language, religion, local or social origin, descent, residence, etc. — as a pretext for attempting their exclusion...

The jointly acting competitors now form an “interest group” towards outsiders; there is a growing tendency to set up some kind of association with rational regulations; if the monopolistic interests persist, the time comes when the competitors establish a legal order that limits competition through formal monopolies... Such closure, as we want to call it, is an ever-recurring process; it is the source of property in land as well as of all guild and other group monopolies (Weber, 1968: I, 341-2).

Such monopolization, or “closure,” is perhaps the main reason why Marx’s theory of the labor movement proved false. Marx assumed that unfettered exploitation would prompt the workers to organize to protect their common interests. But the successful formation of working class organizations was also the means by which the gains won through organization could be monopolized through closure against further competition.<sup>3</sup>

Monopolization of opportunities is always a precarious achievement. It requires defense against the interests of outsiders and depends on the solidarity of the group. Group membership may be voluntary. But a monopoly can be ensured by rules which restrict membership, just as the solidarity of the group can be supported by rules which control participation. The organization of groups thus involves closure against further competition and control by the organization over its own members. Both strategies can be made more enduring if the monopoly is anchored in law

and its restrictions are enforced by the government.<sup>4</sup>

#### Conclusions

From the preceding discussion, two conclusions follow for the study of inequality, one political, and the other historical. On the political side, Marx had interpreted all social and political associations as parts of a superstructure determined by the inequalities within the organization of production. Weber challenged such reductionism. He agreed that classes *tend* to form under the conditions Marx had specified. But he denied that association and organized action must result from this tendency, even in the long run. In each case, concerted action depends on a staff of persons administering the rules of the organized group and on the fluctuating relations between group-members and the administrative staff. The same consideration applies to government. Weber would have agreed with Raymond Aron’s distinction between ruling classes and political classes. On the one hand, there are “privileged people who, without exercising actual political functions, influence those who govern and those who obey, either because of the moral authority which they hold, or because of the economic or financial power they possess.” But there are also those who “actually exercise the political functions of government” (Aron, 1966: 204; Weber, 1968: I, 56). The officials constituting this political class have an administrative apparatus ready at hand. Economic classes, by contrast, must organize to be effective. Public employment also induces a common outlook. Officials are recruited on the basis of educational background and technical competence, to which administrative experience is then added. To an extent, they can interpose their judgment between any decision and its execution. Their ability to do so is a major organizational reason for the decision-making capacity of government, even when the pressure of interest-groups is great. Actions of government have a momentum of their own, they are more than mere enlargements of tendencies already existing in the society. The first conclusion is, therefore, that *organized* actions are only a possible outcome of classes

<sup>3</sup> Weber calls this “domination by virtue of a constellation of interest (in particular by virtue of a position of monopoly)” (1968: III, 943). Marx analyzed monopolizing tendencies of the “ruling class,” but Weber emphasized that such tendencies exist at all levels.

<sup>4</sup> Weber calls this “domination by virtue of authority” based on a shared belief in its legitimacy (1968: III, 943).

or status-groups, but a necessary by-product of the exercise of public authority.

The second conclusion is historical and requires more explication. Although economic and social differences exist in all societies, the distinction between classes and status-groups, between experience in the workplace and in the family is peculiar to modern history. At one time, workplace and family life were part of the same household unit; ambition for gain and status were thus not readily distinguishable. The process of separation has occurred over long periods of time and in several different ways. Originally, aristocratic estates encompassed all aspects of social and economic life; but with the growth of court society, this unity weakened. At the highest levels of the aristocracy, law or custom precluded commercial pursuits; yet status-preoccupations at Court depended on the economic yield of estates, often managed by an agent hired for the purpose. Here status striving could so prevail over economic activities that aristocrats disdained to concern themselves with their own income. In the case of business enterprises, Weber has characterized a very different separation of functions:

First, the household ceased to exist as a necessary basis of rational business association. Henceforth, the partner was not necessarily—or typically—a house member. Consequently, business assets had to be separated from the private property of the partners. Similarly, a distinction began to be made between the business employees and the domestic servants. Above all, the commercial debts had to be distinguished from the private debts of the partners, and joint responsibility had to be limited to the former....

What is crucial is the separation of household and business for accounting and legal purposes, and the development of a suitable body of laws, such as the commercial register, elimination of dependence of the association and the firm upon the family, separate property of the private firm or limited partnership, and appropriate laws of bankruptcy (Weber, 1968: I, 379).

As Weber notes, this development was paralleled at higher and subsequently at lower levels of government administration by the

separation of the “bureau” from the household and of official finances from private property. A comparable separation occurred when workers had to leave their households in order to go to their places of work. Such was the case in the factories of the early nineteenth century, when men, women, and children began to be separately employed in workplaces away from their homes. Even today, this separation from the home has not been carried through in many economic activities like farming, small-scale trading, or various artistic endeavors. Yet, places of work have become separated from family households so generally that the distinction between classes and status-groups has acquired institutional as well as analytical importance.

Equally characteristic of modern history is the institutional separation of society and the state, of socio-economic position and public office. In modern Western societies great wealth and high social rank are institutionally separated from governmental authority. Property ownership and family status may facilitate political influence, but they provide no basis for the exercise of official functions. Conversely, lack of property or status—while obviously a handicap—do not imply exclusion from political participation. This separation of society from the state conflicts with the older view which treated public office as an attribute of social rank and wealth, and which viewed society as a whole as a reservoir of resources at the disposal of an absolute ruler. The separation of state and society also conflicts with the modern, pluralist view which sees society as a composite of interest groups, and government as the handmaiden of these interest groups. Neither the old nor the new approach accounts adequately for state and society as closely related, but separable complexes of organized, collective action. I suggest that the institutional separations of class from status-group, and of society from the state broadly distinguish the modernizing from the “traditionalizing”<sup>5</sup> components of the social structure.

<sup>5</sup>I regret the introduction of this neologism, but it is meant to make the reification of “tradition” more difficult. For much the same reason Weber wrote *Vergesellschaftung* for *Gesellschaft* and *Vergemeinschaftung* for *Gemeinschaft*. Perhaps the simple nouns are unavoidable, but it should be understood that they stand for tendencies rather than entities.

*B. Inequality as a Force in Pre-Modern History*

To distinguish modern from pre-modern history is to distinguish both between periods of history and between types of society. Such division into ideal types has its uses, but it is a starting point of analysis, not an end product. Much of what we consider typically modern can be found in societies of the remote past. Contract was a major feature of medieval feudalism and universal beliefs characterized medieval Catholicism. Much of what we consider typically traditional can be found in present day societies. Kinship continues to play a role in our experience despite the decline of extended families; status considerations are a major preoccupation even in the absence of most outward tokens of status. We must beware of the simplistic view that traditional societies become modern in any straightforward or inevitable manner (Bendix, 1970: ch. XI).

What grounds do we have then for distinguishing between tradition and modernity at all? In their answers to this question there is little difference between Marx and Weber. For that reason I dispense with further comparisons between them.

One answer was anticipated in the preceding discussion. If "modernity" is shorthand for the separation of class, status, and authority, then "tradition" stands for their fusion. Until the early modern period, economic activities were an aspect of the household. Status depended more on the individual's family ties than it does where modernizing tendencies prevail. In this sense, India is a striking example of a traditional society. Her social relations hinge on differences existing from birth. Individuals deal with one another as members of religious, ethnic, or linguistic communities. This communal membership is given an elaborate cultural rationale. Such ascendancy of the group over the individual exists elsewhere as well: the prevalence of communal ties characterizes the traditional aspect of societies.

De Tocqueville pointed out that medieval households were solidary despite the enormous social distance between masters and servants. Superiority of rank and bearing, refinement of taste, great wealth and luxury lifted the world of masters to a sublime level in the eyes of their dependents. Servants necessarily lacked

these qualities. Their status was inferior in their own eyes as much as in those of others. Yet de Tocqueville points out that a personal intimacy often existed between master and servant, especially where their relationship was hereditary. The master's standing was handed down to him through his family, just as his servants also looked back to the loyal service of their forebears. Ties of sentiment arose out of such shared family histories. De Tocqueville's picture of the master-servant relationship (de Tocqueville, 1954: I, 8-9; II, 177-85) had its parallel in the relation between the king and his subordinates. At court, an elaborate etiquette allowed for degrees of intimacy with the supreme ruler, routinizing the competition for status among service-ranks and enabling the king to govern by distributing favors (Elias, 1969: ch. 5).

This combination of social distance and personal intimacy is not confined to aristocratic households. It recurs in relations between the master and other members of his household, between merchants and domestics, craftsmen and their apprentices, and landlords and peasants. It recurs also between the pater familias and his dependents in the ancient world, or in the family compounds of Far Eastern societies that were ruled by the head of the clan. The composition and organization of households has been exceedingly diverse. But they have in common that they are patriarchal, every member of the household being subordinate to the head or master. They encompass persons of several social ranks, who depend for their standing in the larger community both on their place within the household and on the status of the household in the larger society. Many such households are based on the yield of the land, supplemented by commercial transactions. Since the household is a unit of production as well as of consumption, all productive and managerial functions are divided among its members according to rank. Like a king on a smaller scale, the master carries out socio-political functions. Within his domain, he is concerned with maintaining traditional forms of behavior in order to assert his authority and keep the passions of his dependents within bounds. Within the larger society he seeks to enhance the social standing and political role of his house.

Thus, the study of inequality in traditional societies poses problems of its own. The

household is a personally dominated community in which the economic wellbeing and the status of the individual depend entirely on the master's decision, and in which the members of the house compete for his favor. On these terms, households are solidary groups. Hence, we need not inquire under what conditions household members of different rank would join in concerted action (class), or by what means they define the circle of their social equals (status-group). This is not to argue for a benign conception of patriarchal relationships. Personal dominance and competition for status are often harsh. The intimacies of men and women living closely together may be cruelly manipulated, since the narrow confines of the household allow for little privacy (Bendix, 1971: 70-83). Instances of despotic rule and revolt abound in the pre-modern history of societies. But in these conditions, rebellions depend upon men breaking out of the confines of their household or estate to join forces and who then are forced back into subservience once their revolt is crushed. Except in periods of crises, the proliferation of little domains effectively insulates the inequalities within households (Marx, 1969: 88-95 and *passim*; Weber, 1968: I, 356-84).

The household is as typical of traditional societies as the enterprise and the market are typical of modern societies. The difference can be seen by comparing modern economics with the pre-modern literature of the "oikos," or household and estate, a literature which goes back to antiquity (Brunner, 1949: chs. 2, 4; 1968: 103-27). A central ideal of economics since the eighteenth century has been free market exchange. By contrast, the ideal household of the older literature was economically self-sufficient and required trade only to supplement its own production. Manuals were written on the management of household and estate, outlining the relations of husband and wife, parents and children, master and servants. A whole range of productive activities was described, from farming to mining or brickmaking. The wife's activities too were enumerated. Attention was given to vineyards and breweries, to the care of animals and pharmaceutical knowledge, to irrigation and fishing, to forestry and hunting. Trade remained an ancillary activity which was condemned if pursued for economic gain. Clearly, this older literature documents that

the separation of economic activities from the family household is a modern development.

Status and authority were as inseparable from the household as production was. We saw earlier that in modern history the status of the individual depends on his family's prestige, its occupational subculture, its educational level, and its economic position. Admission to the circle of equals can be a matter of intense competition. All this is true of the pre-modern period, but with one crucial difference: the household was under the inherited authority of a master. Heads of households determined who may eat at table and in what rank-order, as well as who is obliged to eat with the servants. Again, within the master's house, no one may marry without his express permission. This practice was still common in nineteenth century Europe not only in the family but among army officers and public officials who needed such permission from their superiors. Similarly, decisions on occupational choice or appropriate level of education were in the hands of the master. By law, the master had the right to punish his dependents, but in theory he was also liable for their conduct. His domination protected the people composing his estate and their welfare depended on his success in asserting the rights of his house and advancing its prosperity.

This view of tradition at the level of the individual and his community may be carried over to the larger society. For the division of society into communities composed of households had important consequences for the internal constitution and the outer boundaries of political structures. Prior to the seventeenth century, nation-states in the sense of contiguous territories with clearly defined frontiers did not exist. Thus, England's loss of Calais in 1558 marked the end of her territorial claims on the Continent which had lasted for centuries. In societies ruled by kings who grant land and rights in return for services, the polity typically consisted of competing jurisdictions. Kings and princes looked upon conquests of what we would consider alien territories, or upon acquisitions through intermarriage, as a means of increasing their resources. Each additional territory or other resource could serve as grants to obtain additional services. At the same time, the ruler's authority was limited internally. Each jurisdiction was removed to some degree from

the sway of central authority, since within his domain the grantee exercised his own authority. As a result, larger political structures could be united only with difficulty, and unity once achieved remained precarious.

Internally, the politics of pre-modern history were swayed by efforts to defend the rights of the household or estate. Such defense was often of a piece with efforts at aggrandizement, in the same way as seeking the protection of the master of an estate was often a mixture of the desire for security and the submission to brute force. As Marc Bloch put it with reference to the Merovingian period:

Everywhere, the weak man felt the need to be sheltered by someone more powerful. The powerful man, in his turn, could not maintain his prestige or his fortune or even his own safety except by securing for himself, by persuasion or coercion, the support of subordinates bound to his service. On the one hand, there was the urgent quest for a protector; on the other, there were usurpations of authority, often by violent means. And as notions of weakness and strength are always relative, in many cases the same man occupied a dual role—as a dependent of a more powerful man and a protector of humbler ones. Thus there began to be built up a vast system of personal relationships whose intersecting threads ran from one level of the social structure to another (Bloch, 1961: 40).

Patriarchal jurisdictions tend to pose rather similar political problems. A ruler's authority often depends for its effectiveness on implementation of his orders by a subordinate jurisdiction. At the same time, each jurisdiction insists on its rights. To an extent, the ruler must accept the autonomy of his dependents. But since his own position requires the collection of taxes in money and kind, he must also control their jurisdictions. This uncertainty of power lay at the root of the protracted feuds which fill the annals of pre-modern history.

Externally, a traditional society which is rent by such uncertainties, is threatened also by uncertain boundaries. For us this is a difficult point to grasp, as we are used to nation-states with clearly defined frontiers. But frontiers are not easily determined if

territorial holdings are at the same time more or less autonomous jurisdictions. The border-areas of a kingdom will use the bargaining advantages of their location to increase the rights they enjoy from the king. These territories are a tempting prize for the king's rivals. As a result, the king's rule over the area may be precarious. Moreover, territorial and jurisdictional units are often widely scattered owing to the vagaries of inheritance, grants, and alliances, so that not only adjacent areas but even the same area may enjoy a variety of rights and owe allegiance to different rulers. Under these conditions it is often possible for territorial jurisdictions to break away when this appears politically promising. There are many instances in which the area between two rulers is not marked by a frontier line, but by a disputed jurisdiction.

Where the fortunes of men wax and wane with the fortunes of the house to which they belong, victory or defeat in jurisdictional feuds bears directly on the well-being of the individual. That well-being depends in large part on the size and productivity of landholdings and on the degree to which political authorities can exact tributes in money or kind. Patriarchal jurisdictions are engaged, therefore, in efforts to better their holding vis à vis their relatives and neighbors as well as in contests with the ruler over the amount and kind of tribute to be paid. In the absence of stable frontiers, this arena of internal contest stands exposed to intrusions from the outside.

### C. Concluding Considerations

The internal struggle over wealth, status, and authority was exposed to foreign influences in new ways in the transition from pre-modern to modern social structures. The social structure of the earlier period was characterized not only by uncertain frontiers, but also by a firm subordination of intellectual life to Church and State. Then frontiers became more clearly defined, national consciousness increased, and the earlier world-view was challenged by men of ideas who became a social force in their own right. In his interpretation of the origin of capitalism, Marx emphasized the "primitive accumulation of capital" through overseas expansion and land-enclosures at home. In these and related developments Weber emphasized the rise of "rational calculation" as the characteristic which distinguished modern from earlier

types of capitalism. Both writers acknowledged, but did not focus attention on the material transformation of intellectual life itself. Yet, the invention of printing, the development of science, and the growth of secular learning brought about a cultural mobilization which had a direct bearing on the social structure of early modern societies.

This impact of cultural mobilization tended to be obscured in nineteenth century Europe. The modern study of inequality began with the Scotch Moralists, St. Simon, and Marx. From their vantage-point, and within clearly defined national frontiers, it was plausible to consider "society" in isolation from other societies, and thus ignore their international setting. Inequality could be interpreted largely in internal economic terms, when the societies involved looked back on centuries of expansion overseas and were in the forefront of the modern, industrial and democratic revolutions. Against this view, I maintain that change is not only internal to a society. The age of exploration and with still greater impact the industrial and political revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries altered the international environment of most societies. Once any of these transformations had been initiated by a country, that country became an object of emulation elsewhere. Intellectuals and governments play a key role in this emulation and adaptation. With the model of another country before them, they seek to overcome the political and social backwardness of their own country, if not to rival the model itself. This demonstration effect of expansion and revolution did not exist in the earlier period and has gone far to break up pre-modern structures of inequality — even in countries which retained their political and economic independence.

I want to retain the questions posed by the Marxian study of inequality, but I do not believe in the Marxian answers. As both Lenin and Weber pointed out, it is necessary to distinguish structural tendencies from the capacity to organize effectively.

I do not believe that social strata or classes are nation-wide phenomena. This would be the case only if all differences arising from familial affiliation were erased. We know that this has not been the case, and today there is no reason to assume that it is the wave of the future.

I do not believe that social classes and

status-groups can be studied satisfactorily by attention to a single society, that such groups are unaffected by events beyond a country's frontiers. This assumption is unwarranted both because ties across national frontiers have developed out of common religious or ethnic affiliations, and because conquest, political control, and the diffusion of techniques and ideas have had a major impact on the social structure of many countries.

Marx assumed that the "infinite fragmentation of interest and rank" would give way to a polarization of classes in the course of capitalist development. In this he relied on the homogenizing impact of exploitation and "egotistical calculation." Today we lack this capacity for strategic simplification, but we lack also its attendant illusions.<sup>6</sup>

Much modern social thought retains its umbilical cord to Marx. I do not think the study of inequality and social structure will advance much until this cord is cut and Marx's insights are used irrespective of their doctrinal and political involvements. This paper is an effort in this direction.

<sup>6</sup> One reason why the "fragmentation of interest and rank" continues is that social structures "once they have come into being... perpetuate themselves, even when the social conditions that created them have disappeared" (Schumpeter, 1951:144-5). Oddly enough, this historical perspective has also disappeared from the Marxist tradition (Loewenthal, 1969:23-4).

#### REFERENCES

- Aron, Raymond  
 1966 "Social class, political class, ruling class." Pp. 201-10 in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status and Power*. 2nd ed. New York: The Free Press.
- Brunner, Otto  
 1949 *Adeliges Landleben und Europäischer Geist*. Salzburg: Otto Müller.  
 1968 "Das 'Ganze Haus' und die alteuropäische Ökonomik," Pp. 103-27 in Otto Brunner, *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte*. Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Bendix, Reinhard  
 1966 "Karl Marx's theory of social classes." Pp. 6-11 in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status, and Power*. 2nd ed. New York: The Free Press.  
 1970 *Embattled Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- 1971 "Ideological and scholarly approaches to industrialization." Pp. 70-83 in Reinhard Bendix and Guenther Roth, *Scholarship and Partisanship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bloch, Marc  
 1961 *Feudal Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dumont, Louis  
 1972 *Homo Hierarchicus*. London: Paladin.
- Elias, Norbert  
 1969 *Die höfische gesellschaft*. Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand.
- Loewenthal, Richard  
 1969 "Unreason and revolution," *Encounter* XXXIII (November):23-34.
- Marx, Karl  
 The Poverty of Philosophy. New York: International Publishers.
- 1936 *Capital*. New York: The Modern Library.
- 1962 *Capital*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- 1969 *On Colonialism and Modernization*. Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co.
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich  
 1939 *The German Ideology*. New York: International Publishers.
- 1967 *The Communist Manifesto*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- Schumpeter, Joseph  
 1951 *Imperialism and Social Classes*. New York: Augustus Kelley.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de  
 1954 *Democracy in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Tucker, Robert  
 1961 *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, Max  
 1968 *Economy and Society*. Tr. and ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. New York: Bedminster Press.

## NEW EDITOR

Effective with the February 1975 issue, Morris Zelditch will become editor of the *American Sociological Review*.

Beginning July 1, 1974, send all manuscripts to:

DR. MORRIS ZELDITCH, JR.  
 Department of Sociology  
 Stanford University  
 Palo Alto, California 94305