

Status

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Sage Encyclopedia of Economics and Society

Edited by: Frederick F. Wherry & Juliet B. Schor

Thousand Oaks, California, 2016

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Any digression on the notion of status in modern sociological theory requires starting from Max Weber's milestone text "class, status and party", where the following ideal-typical distinction of social groups is presented: a) the determinant criterion is economic, a perspective of mere de facto membership predominates and the group is formally open, producing "class"; b) the decisive criterion is prestige, the issue of reciprocal recognition prevails and so the group tends to closure, leading to "status-group"; c) the criteria is broadly political, referring to a partial group inside a larger association, seeking to coordinate action towards the exercise of power within the latter, hence "party".

In the case of class, the immanent logic is so more fully expressed the more a "market principle" such as defined by mainstream economics prevails, that is, without barriers to entry or exit, price levels established by the competition and accepted by agents as mere parameters. Inasmuch the market-principle is instead oligopoly, the conduct of each agent therefore having a significant rebound in the definition of the environment faced by others, the rationality of conduct ceases being "parametric" and becomes "strategic", therefore a broadly political dimension, a logic of "party" inevitably emerging. On the other hand, in case the "utility-function" of each agent depends on the others, particularly out of an "agonistic" element involved in consumption practices assuming a "conspicuous" character, the situation has also an undeniable component of "status".

Weber's tripartite classification echoes both the opposition between "contract" and "status" established by Henry Sumner Maine, and the distinction posited by Karl Marx between "class in itself" and "class for itself". According to Maine that opposition largely corresponds to the differences between tradition and modernity, custom and fixity of social positions predominating in the first case, voluntary decision and mobility in the second. As for Marx's conceptual pair, the first term expresses a mere factual existence, the second implying reciprocal recognition and, accordingly, a concerted political conduct towards power-taking. Marx conceived his own work as a means of transformation of the modern proletariat from a simple "class in itself" into a "class for itself", endowed with "class consciousness".

Weber only partly accepts Maine's antinomy, since he assumes a dimension of status unavoidable also in modern societies, and he transforms the Marxian dichotomy into a tripartite scheme. Classes indeed denote an economic reality and refer to a merely factual membership, disregarding recognition by other agents. Depending on the researcher's perspective and interests, they may be grouped in multiple ways and relating both to production and to consumption, whereby various conditions and diversely inclined types: a consumption-class, necessarily adopting one particular lifestyle, tends much more to be closely correlated with a status-group than a production-class. More importantly, the passage from "in itself" unto "for itself" actually unfolds in two rather distinct processes. Indeed, an element of mutual recognition and mutually oriented action is present in both status-group and party. Concerning party, however, action is consciously instrumental, aiming at certain practical results, while in status-group we face what later sociology called "expressive" or "symbolic", as opposed to "instrumental", action. The membership of a status-group constitutes an end in itself, the central point of interaction consisting in being recognized by the other members as "one of us".

It is, nevertheless, important to acknowledge that these three dimensions are only ideal-typical, factual reality corresponding to various possible combinations. Thus, and as we have seen, a high status entails the adoption of an expensive lifestyle, and so one necessary connection to consumption-class immediately emerges. On the other hand, if a logic of status exerts a decisive influence in economic life, the "open-market" principle is expelled and therefore professional groups tend to become castes, as with traditional Indian society. And many other cases of mingling of dynamics are identifiable.

Although Weber only modestly granted the notion of the weakening of the status component in modern societies, several other authors later made this a crucial point. That was namely the case with Ralph Linton, although the opposition is in his case rephrased in terms of an antinomy between "ascribed" and "achieved" status, which configures the difference between fixity and mobility, or components transmitted by inheritance and components stemming from individual performance. This, in turn, expresses the fundamental difference between traditional and modern societies.

The distinction established by Linton was later retrieved by Talcott Parsons, who relates it to his general sociological framework, or "pattern variables", namely the one referring to ascription-versus-achievement. Parsons emphasizes the distinction between "ascribed status" and "achieved status", the first denoting personal attributes on which one typically holds no control, such as age, race or sex, the second referring to aspects acquired through effort or merit, with the conclusion that contemporary societies tend to encourage individual social mobility more than did traditional ones and "achieved status" being instrumental in the distribution of rewards.

Various other authors, and in fact alluding to the Latin etymology of the word, have established a correspondence between the ideas of "status" and "position" in society, highlighting in this concept a static, fixed or "structural" component, of which the notion of "role" would express the dynamic, active or "functional" reverse. Others have

underlined the specificity of the concept of “status”, as opposed to “role”, while group of resources allowing actors to interpret or play their roles according to original modulations. Partially in the same sense, a distinction is sometimes established between those two terms treating “status” as a sanction for the way how actors play their “roles”. In both cases, “status” is rather more informal and personal, but also (and partly for the same reason) more stable, while “role” is deemed more immediately social and more institutional/formal, but explicitly more changeable as well. Mention is also due to the distinction between “objective” status, associated with formal juridical rights of individuals, and “subjective” or self-perceived status, in spite of analytic recognition that even self-assessment of each individual is indeed largely due to perceptions experienced by other agents, i.e. socially defined.

Finally, and notwithstanding greater emphasis often put on the issue of individual status, other authors still, explicitly claiming a Weberian perspective, have mostly stressed the notion of groups and communities of status qua integrated and combative social collectivities. Indeed, groups with identical lifestyles, cultural references and moral systems tend to create solidarity, separate communities organized in order to enjoy privileges and benefits. In this context, one should distinguish two notions regarding status: cultural status, strictly referring to lifestyle, and status as political-legal right, i.e. containing also an essential component of citizenship.

Further Readings

Turner, Bryan S. Status. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Weber, Max. Economy and Society. New York: Bedminster Press, 1968.

Parsons, Talcott. The Social System. New York: Free Press, 1951.