



Essay writing

Sociology

Annotated example



UNIVERSITY
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The first year Sociology essay on the following pages was written in response to the prompt:

Critically compare the views of Marx and Weber on the nature of class.

OUTLINE

Thesis

Orientation: class is an important concept in sociology.

Thesis statement: Marx argues that class is determined by economic factors, whereas Weber argues that social stratification cannot be defined solely in terms of class.

Point

Marx's perception of class is primarily economical:

1. there are two major social classes, definable in terms of ownership and non-ownership of property
2. power of ruling class leads to exploitation of subject class.

Point

Marx's perception of the relationship between the classes is one of dependence and inequality.

1. these features are a cause of conflict.

Point

Marx argues that because the ruling class has economic power, they have political power:

1. ruling class dominate social institutions through economic power
2. dominance of ruling class will result in class struggle, and ultimately will lead to social change.

Point (transition to Weber)

Weber's theory of class differs partly to Marx's theory: it includes stratification along the lines of status and party:

1. similarities: notion of class in regards to ownership
2. difference: Weber identifies 4 main classes.

Point

According to Weber class is distinct from status:

1. consideration of status for a social theory of class, and party allegiance.

Point and pre-conclusion

Comparison of Marx and Weber's notion of class: focus on differences.

Conclusion

Summing up of the similarities and differences of the theoretical perspectives.

ACADEMIC LITERACY

Learning, Teaching & Curriculum – Learning Development



ANNOTATION TO THE ESSAY

Annotations in the right hand column highlight significant features of the essay, such as structure and how evidence for the argument is built up and incorporated.

Example: student essay

Class is an important concept in sociology, and the views of Karl Marx and Max Weber in regard to the issue thus provide a source for endless debate. This essay will attempt to critically compare the views of Marx and Weber, by examining the main ideas of each theorist about the notion of class. Marx's main argument is that class is determined by economic factors alone, whereas in contrast, Weber argues that social stratification cannot be defined solely in terms of class and the economic factors which affect class relationships. The two theories will then be compared so as to examine where the main differences between the two schools of thought lie.

orientation to topic

thesis statement (also functions as outline of essay)

Marx sees class as a social group whose members share the same relationships to the means of production (Haralambos, 1985; Giddens, 1971). He proposes that in all stratified societies there are two major social classes: the ruling class and the subject class, which are definable in terms of ownership and non-ownership of resources. The power of the ruling class is chiefly derived from the ownership and control of the forces of production, and this power leads the ruling class to exploit and subject class, which in turn creates a basic conflict of interest between the two groups (Haralambos, 1985: 39). In modern capitalist society these two classes comprise the capitalists, who own the means of production, and wage labourers, who sell their labour to the capitalists in return for wages (Haralambos, 1985: p. 39). According to both Swingewood (1984: p. 86) and Giddens (1993: p. 217), however, Marx acknowledges that class development produces a more complex structure of classes and class relations than this model would suggest, and that within each class there exists a number of groups or factions with different interests and values.

point: Marx's perception of class is primarily economical explanation

exemplification draws on other sources to expand Marx's notion of class.

transition to next paragraph

Marx argues that the ordering of classes and the nature of class conflict is historically variable, changing with the emergence of successive forms of society (Giddens, 1971: p. 39). Marx sees the relationship between the two major classes as one of mutual dependence and conflict. Thus in capitalist society the bourgeoisie (the owning class) and the proletariat (the working class) are dependent upon each other, since wage labourers must sell their labour in order to survive, as they do not own or have control over the means of production, and therefore lack the means to produce goods independently, which subsequently makes them dependent on the capitalist class for their livelihoods (Haralambos, 1985: p. 40). At the same time, however, the capitalists are dependent on the working class for the provision of labour power, without which there would be no production. Yet according to Marx this mutual dependency is obviously not an equal relationship but rather a relationship between "exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed" (Haralambos, 1985: p. 40).

(link to previous paragraph) class development and class conflict are variable

point: Marx on relationship between the classes: dependence and inequality are a cause of conflict

Marx argues that political power derives from the economic power of the ruling class (Giddens, 1971: p. 39), that is, from the ownership and control of the means of production. He suggests that social institutions are also shaped by economic factors and that the ruling class thus dominates these institutions, or social 'superstructure' (Haralambos, 1985: p. 41). Therefore, these social institutions provide the tools for ruling class domination and the oppression of the subject class. Marx argues that the ongoing process of oppression and exploitation inevitably leads to conflict between social classes, and it is this class struggle which is the driving force behind social change. Marx himself suggests that:

point: Marx says ruling class have economic power, and so political power evidence: ruling class dominate institutions



Example: student essay

"history of all societies up to the present is the history of class struggles" (cited in Haralambos, 1985: p. 42).

Marx suggests that the basic contradictions of capitalist society will lead to the eventual destruction of this society, as an inevitable working class revolution will take place to overthrow the bourgeoisie and seize the forces of production (Haralambos, 1985: p. 42).

Weber's theory of class, although built partly on the analysis developed by Marx, differs somewhat to that of his predecessor. Weber argues that class is only one form of stratification, the other dimensions being status and party (Giddens, 1971: p. 163). Weber, like Marx, states that main class divisions are caused by economic factors, suggesting situations, in terms of possession of goods and services, and for income, as a result of the working of a commodity or labour market (Weber, 1909-1920: p. 126). Weber agrees with Marx that ownership versus non-ownership provides the main basis of class division (Giddens, 1971: p. 165), however, Weber identifies four main classes as opposed to Marx's two. These classes are: the manual working class, the petty bourgeoisie, the property-less white collar workers, and the dominant entrepreneurial and propertied groups (Giddens, 1971: p. 165).

Weber argues that class is distinct from status. Status is referred to as the evaluations made by others regarding social positions which result in the attribution of positive or negative social esteem (Giddens, 1971: p. 167). According to Haralambos (1985: p. 46), class is different to status in that class represents the unequal distribution of economic rewards, while status involves the unequal distribution of 'social honour'. In Weberian terms, the consideration of status is important because sometimes status rather than class provides the basis for social groups with a common interest and common identity, and furthermore the presence of different status groups within a single class leads to the weakening of class solidarity and decreases the potential for the development of class consciousness (Giddens, 1971: p. 46). Party is also important in modern societies, as the formation of political parties can influence power and stratification independently of class and status (Giddens, 1993, p. 219).

Thus, it is clear that there are a number of fundamental differences between the ideas of Marx and Weber on the notion of class. Weber believes factors apart from ownership and non-ownership of property can influence the formation of classes. Furthermore, Weber sees no evidence to support the polarisation of classes which Marx sees as being an essential feature of the class structure. Another difference is, unlike Marx; Weber does not subscribe to the view that a proletarian revolution is inevitable, and that workers will express class dissatisfaction in less dramatic ways. Finally, Weber rejects the notion that political power is necessarily derived from economic power (Haralambos, 1985: p. 45). Essentially, the difference between the theories of Marx and Weber seems to lie in the fact that Marx sees economic factors as the main cause of division between classes, while Weber argues that social stratification is definable in terms of status and party as well as class (Giddens, 1993: p. 218-219).

concludes point: dominance leads to conflict, struggle, and social change

*transition to Weber's theory of class (link to essay question)
point: Weber includes status and party similarities and differences between Marx and Weber's notion of class*

*point: Weber considers status distinct from class (unlike Marx)
relevance of status for social theory of class
secondary point: importance of party allegiance in influencing social stratification*

point: difference between Marx and Weber's theory of class

further explanation for differences markers of discourse structure: thus; furthermore; another difference



Example: student essay

Accordingly, it seems that while the theories of Marx and Weber on the notion of class may have some common aspects, they also contain some fundamental differences, which centre around the idea proposed by Marx that class is determined solely by economic factors, whereas Weber would argue that class is only one form of social stratification. It is an impossible task to decide which theory provides the most accurate description of class, thus not surprisingly the issue continues to be a topic of contentious debate. Weber's theory certainly encompasses aspects which Marx seems to have left out, yet the importance of Marx's theories cannot be undermined.

*Conclusion:
summing up on
similarities and
differences of
the theoretical
perspectives
author's
reflection and
comment*

LANGUAGE FEATURES

- **discipline specific terms:** eg class, social stratification, capitalist society, capitalists
- **evaluation / interpretation:** absence of personal, subjective words and phrases; impersonal expression of interpretation: eg class is an important concept in sociology; class development produces a more complex structure ... than this model would suggest

NOTE

The reference list has not been included here, but you must include a reference list or bibliography in all your assignments. Also, this essay is of course only one possible response to the question.

