Annotated models of disciplinary essays

7. Annotated Sociology essay

The essay question
The first year sociology essay on the following pages was written in response to this question:

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

Essay outline
This outline forms the basis of the Sociology essay

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.

Argument
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

Argument
Marx’s perception of the relationship between the classes is one of dependence and inequality.
1. these features are a cause of conflict

Argument
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

Argument (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

Argument
According to Weber class is distinct from status
1. consideration of status for a social theory of class, and party allegiance

Argument 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

Essay annotations

Annotations are provided in the right hand column. These annotations highlight significant features of the essay, such as structure and how evidence for the argument is built up and incorporated. The annotations in ‘text boxes’ provide further comment on features such as academic language and referencing conventions. For further information on these features see the relevant self access modules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student essay</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>thesis orientation to topic</td>
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<td><strong>Marx’s thesis statement</strong></td>
<td>thesis statement (also functions as outline of essay)</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>argument paragraph’s argument: Marx’s perception of class is primarily economical explanation of argument</td>
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<td><strong>Language features of academic writing:</strong></td>
<td>further exemplification</td>
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<td><em>Discipline specific language</em> e.g. class, social stratification, capitalist society, capitalists</td>
<td>draws on other sources to expand on Marx’s notion of class. Likewise transition to next paragraph (class development, class struggles)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Evaluative and interpretative language</em> absence of personal, subjective language. Rather evaluation and interpretation is expressed in an impersonal way. e.g class is an important concept in sociology, class development produces a more complex structure … than this model would suggest discussing the ideas of others_ verbs of saying and perception to report the ideas of others. e.g. Marx sees; He proposes; According to both Swingewood ...; Weber argues</td>
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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).

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 “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).

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.

Note: the original student essay included a detailed reference list, which has been omitted here. You must include a reference list in the work you submit. Also, this essay is one possible response to the above question.

Acknowledgment

This unit is from material developed for R. Woodward-Kron, E. Thomson & J Meek (2000), Academic Writing: a language based guide (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong.