



## Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology



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*ALLISON L. HURST*

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY  
CORVALLIS, OR



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# I. CSP

## The Distribution of Power: Classes, Status, Groups,<sup>1</sup>

The word Weber uses here is STÄNDE and there are no exact English equivalents. It has most often been translated as “status,” but this is not quite right. As Waters and Waters (2010) note, the German word for status is, well, status. Weber did not use this word. Instead, he used a word that has an equivalent to way the French use “estate,” to mean a social group with hereditary ties, linked to rights and responsibilities in a given community. Here, we sometimes retain the German word and sometime use “status group” as the least bad approximation for the contemporary reader. Note that Stand is the singular form.

### and Parties

“ Every order affects the distribution of power.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from the posthumous 1921 collection of essays, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, first translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1947 as *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*. It was later translated by Eric Mathews and published as “Classes, Status Groups, and Parties” in Runciman’s *Weber: Selections in Translation*(1978). It was completely retranslated by students under the direction of Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters, and published in 2010 as “The Distribution of Power within the Community: Classes, Stände, Parties,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*10(2): 137-152. The passage here is a loose translation of the original German, condensed for easier reading. For a more exact and complete translation, also updated for today’s reader, see Waters and Waters (2010).

## Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Identifying the social divisions that operate in any given society is an essential task for the sociologist. Before we can do that, however, we must have an agreed-upon sense of the basis of those social divisions. This passage sets out Weber’s description of the various ways in which social groups set themselves against other social groups. Classes, status groups, and parties are various ways in which divisions between social groups can operate, at least in the sense of power over and power between. Unlike Marx, who saw class as the ultimate expression of social division and power, Weber saw class as but one possible manifestation, operating primarily in the economic sphere, while status groups operate in the social sphere, and parties operate in the political sphere. Weber’s tripartite understanding of basic social divisions has proven helpful to many social researchers

1.

who attempt to map and understand how people group themselves and with what consequences. Pay careful attention to the historic links he draws between class and capitalism, as well as the way in which status groups dominated power relations in pre-capitalist communities.

NOTE: Weber uses the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as special terms to denote different kinds of historical communities. These terms were very popular at the time of this writing and every reader would have understood the reference. In many ways, *Gemeinschaften* are similar to Durkheim's mechanical solidarity societies while *Gesellschaften* are similar to Durkheim's organic solidarity societies.

## Introduction on Power

Every order affects the distribution of power. In general, by power we mean the chance of a person or group of persons to enforce their will on others, even against resistance. Power need not be for money but may be desirable for its own sake. In some cases, it is desired for social recognition or honor. The legal order can guarantee power and honor, but it is not normally the primary source of either. It is an additional factor that enhances the opportunity to possess power or a good reputation. The distribution of power within a community we may call the social order. The social order is not the same thing as the economic order, although it is highly determined by the economic order and in turns effects it.

## The Distribution of Power within a *Gemeinschaft* Community: Classes, Status Groups, and Parties

### *Classes*

Classes, strictly speaking, are not common in *Gemeinschaft* communities. A class exists only when all three of the following conditions are met: (1) when a large number of people have a specific causal component of their life chances in common; (2) when this causal component is exclusively related to economic interests in the possession of goods and the opportunities of income; and (3) when this operates under the condition of a commodity or labor market. When specific life chances are created by the manner in which material property is distributed among a large enough group of people meeting competitively in the market for exchange, we can talk of classes. Property and lack of property are the basic categories of all class situations. We can refine this further into what kinds of property are used for generating income and exchange. Here are some examples:

- Ownership of residential houses, factories, stores, agriculturally productive land
- Ownership of mines, of domestic animals, of people (slaves)
- Disposition of the mobile tools of production or acquired capital goods
- Ownership of products of one's own labor or "marketable" skills

Owners are differentiated from each other by the type of property owned (e.g., slave-owners are distinct from factory-owning capitalists or pensioners living off of stock dividends). Property-less workers are also starkly differentiated from each other, according to the kinds of services they offer and whether they are temporary wage workers or salaried employees. In all cases, though, the concept of class is organized around the chances in the market that determine the common conditions of an individual's fate.

## *Stände (Status Groups)*

The existence of *Stände* hinders the realization of the naked market principle that is the essence of class. The great shift from *Stände* to classes has been going on in the past up to the present (early 19th century). *Stände*, in contrast to classes are normally communally based *Gemeinschaften*. However, they are often of an amorphous sort. In contrast to 'class situations,' which are purely determined by the economy, *Stände* result from a typical integral part of life, in which a person's fate depends on a specific positive or negative social assessment of honor. This assessment of honor is tied to the common characteristics of a stereotypical member of the particular *Stand*. To complicate things further, such honor may also be tied to a class situation, to the amount and kind of property held in the economy. It is common that the differences between classes and *Stände* can be combined in numerous ways (e.g., a slave-owning member of the aristocracy, a property-less citizen). However, property as such does not always generate prestige in terms of increased honor within the *Stand*.

In today's modern democracy, an explicitly ordered privilege of single individuals according to their *Stände* does not exist, although it does happen that families who belong to the same income bracket dance with each other. It is possible for both people with property and people without property to belong to the same *Stand*, of course.

The honor of the *Stand* is predominantly expressed through a specific lifestyle and is imposed on anyone who wants to belong to that social circle. Linked with this lifestyle are restrictions on social intercourse with other *Stände*, unless those interactions deal with economic or commercial purposes. People marry within their *Stand*, strict endogamy operates in *Stände*.

When the most extreme consequences of stratification are reached, the *Stand* evolves into a closed caste. Rituals develop guaranteeing *Stände*-related distinctions. This is achieved by restricting any physical contact of members of higher castes with members of lower castes, thereby protecting the purity of the higher caste. As a result, the *Stände*-related stratifications can lead to the development of castes where the underlying differentiations are held to be ethnic or racial. The Jews are the most impressive historic example of this. The caste structure transforms the horizontal unconnected coexistence of ethnically segregated communities into a vertical system of hierarchical stratification. Where ethnic coexistence permits any ethnic group to value its personal honor as the highest, caste stratification acknowledges higher honor among privileged castes and *Stände*

From a practical point of view, stratification by *Stände* goes hand in hand with monopolization of both symbolic and material goods and opportunities. Besides the specific honor of *Stand*, which always bases itself upon distance and exclusiveness, there are all sorts of specific monopolies, such as the right to wear special costumes or eat special dishes denied to others, or even the privilege of carrying arms.

Typically, the privileged *Stände* avoid common physical labor. This disqualification is even beginning in democratic America, despite older contrary traditions which esteemed physical labor highly. In addition, every rational economic pursuit, particularly “mercantile activity” is often considered to disqualify a person from being a member of the most privileged *Stände*. Even artistic work, if done for money, is considered degrading, and especially so when connected with hard physical exertion and effort, such as the case of a sculptor working in a dusty smock.

*Stände* are thus quite distinct from classes! The market knows no “honor” or ‘prestige’ but the reverse is true for the *Stand*. Stratification and privileges in terms of honor and of lifestyles are inherent to each *Stand* and as such are threatened by market forces. Mere economic acquisition and naked economic power bear a stigma from their origin for *Stände*. Why is this? All groups interested in the *Stände* orders react with fierceness against the pretensions of purely economic acquisitions because it undercuts the basis of honor and prestige. Otherwise, the wealthiest person would be the most honorable of them all! The privileged *Stände* groups never accept the newly arrived, the *nouveau riche*, not unreservedly, even if he has adapted his lifestyle to theirs. The privileged *Stände* will only accept their descendants – those raised from birth in the proper conventions, and who have never compromised their honor by participating in economic labor.

Accordingly and predictably, the *Stände* stratification restrains the free development of the market. First, the development of the market is hindered by the goods which the privileged *Stände* monopolize, thereby taking them, if you will, out of free circulation. This can be done by law or convention, as with the case of inherited estates. There is thus no actual free market competition in a *Stände* stratification system. But secondly, is the conflictual relationship between *Stände* and the economic order. The notion of honor peculiar to the *Stand* abhors the commercial activity, the bargaining, which is essential to the market.

Thus, to summarize:

- Classes are stratified according to relations to production and acquisition of goods.
- *Stände* are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by specific lifestyles.

We might also say that each occupation is a *Stand*, where and when each has its own specific lifestyle, established by the occupation (e.g., knights, professors, priests). Classes and *Stände* are different but at the same time they blend and certainly often overlap.

So only a general statement can be made about when we are more likely to see *Stände* or Classes emerge as the predominant structuring force. A relatively stable base for the acquisition and distribution of goods is necessary for *Stände* stratification to be favored. Destabilization by technical and economic change and upheaval can threaten *Stand* stratification by pushing the class situation into the foreground. Eras and countries in which the naked class situation is of predominant significance are normally the periods of

technological and economic transformations. In contrast, every slowing down of an economic shifting process in a short time leads to the awakening of the *Stand* culture, with the result that social 'honor' is reestablished.

## *Parties*

The genuine home of classes is within the economic order and the genuine home of *Stände* is within the social order (the sphere of the distribution of prestige and honor). Parties, however, are primarily at home within the sphere of power.

Party actions are directed towards attaining social power, which means they are directed towards influencing collective action. Parties can only develop within communities organized along *Gesellschaft* principles, societies that some kind of rational order and an apparatus of persons available read to enforce that rational order. That is because parties direct collective action towards particular goals or ends. The goal of the party is to influence this apparatus of persons or become this apparatus of person.

Parties can represent interests determined by class situations or *Stände* situations and recruit followers accordingly, but they are conceptually distinct from those classes and *Stände*.

Parties can have brief or long-lasting structures. Their means of attaining power can be quite diverse, ranging from naked violence of any kind, to campaigning for votes, to elaborate tactics of obstruction within parliamentary bodies. In order to truly understand parties, we need to understand and discuss the structures of social domination.

### *Questions for Contemplation and Discussion*

1. Is Weber's "similar life chances" definition of class very different from Marx's notion of class? Explain your answer.
2. Can you think of a different term for STÄNDE (other than status group)?
3. Weber makes a claim that privileged *Stände* do not engage in physical labor. Read Veblen here and compare.
4. Do *Stände* or Classes predominate in today's society? How do you know?

## Concepts

Power

Social Order

Class and Class situation

*Stände* and *Stände* situation

Party