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At the onset of the nation state and mass industrialization, Max Weber and Karl Marx both sought to rationalize the social stratification they observed as a result of economic change. Marx saw social stratification as falling into two extremes under capitalism: “the property owners and the propertyless workers” (Tucker 70). Weber challenged Marx’s concept by arguing that social stratification develops as a result of both class situation and status group. In this paper, we will critically compare Marx and Weber’s theory on social stratification. Then, we will examine how Weber’s theory applies to the dynamics of Mexican drug cartels.

### **Weber: social stratification as a function of the market and lifestyle**

Weber argues that social stratification is a function of class situation and status honor. Class, which he calls class situation, refers to the life chances a particular group of people have as a result of their market situation. Weber observes that groups of people have “in common a specific causal component of their life chances...[that is] represented under the condition of commodity or labor markets” (Weber 181). Here, Weber agrees with Marx that the market is a determining factor of class. Unlike Marx, however, Weber sees differentiation within class that goes beyond just property owners and propertyless workers. He observes that the way in which people use their property either for returns or services represent separate class situations. What Weber describes is that the differences in utilization and giving property meaning translate directly to differences in life chances. He uses the example of a rentier and an entrepreneur, showing that although they are within the same class of owning property, they differ in the life chances afforded by that property.

Marx would stop here; making an argument that class is simply our relationship to the modes of production. Weber observes that another variable, status honor, influences social stratification in a way that class may not. Importantly, Weber sees class as separate from status. Status honor refers to the “typical component(s) of the life fate of men that is determined by... [a] social estimation of honor” (Weber 187). Weber explains that one’s life chances are not purely a result of economic variables but can be determined by less tangible, social factors. Communities of people that exhibit a “specific style of life”<sup>1</sup> are where status manifests. These lifestyles come with “restrictions on social intercourse” that are “not subservient to economic...purposes” (Weber 187). In other words, status is developed by one’s relationship to communities that share rituals and a specific lifestyle. There are certain opportunities (and subsequent restrictions) that status can provide, which economic power and class cannot.

Weber demonstrates this concept of status honor cleverly with an anecdote about how the lifestyle of a gentleman enables social mobility that may increase his life chances. From Weber’s perspective, the “pretend” gentleman is recognized by others as having some sort of legitimate status that warrants him employment and connections with other high status families. In this scenario, it is not economic power that determines this gentleman’s placement. Instead, it is the social honor that he gets from assimilating into a specific lifestyle that expands his life chances.

Weber’s class theory outlines how class situation and status honor influence one another in no particular order to create a highly differentiated social hierarchy. Like the gentleman, lifestyle can enable life circumstances that lead to economic success and high class situation. Marx fundamentally disagrees with this approach, arguing that exploitation on behalf of property-owners is the only element that determines social stratification.

### **Relating Weber’s theory to the class complexities of the Mexican cartel gangs**

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<sup>1</sup> Weber, Max. “Class, Status, Party.” pp. 187

Mexico's drug cartels are an example in which Weber's theory of social stratification can be applied. While they possess significant 'mere economic power,' they lack the status and social legitimacy needed to broaden their life chances. In other words, they are tangibly limited by their low status honor.

In NPR's article and podcast, "Narconomics", the Mexican drug cartels are assimilated economically and structurally to Walmart. The cartels have "exclusive relationships with their suppliers that allow [them] to keep the price of cocaine stable even when crop production is disrupted" (Gross). Despite being an illegal trade, the cartels maintain considerable market power when you observe their control of price fluctuations, the supply chain and their labor supply. Illicit drugs are now one of Mexico's biggest exports meaning that the cartels control an over \$150 billion dollar market. According to Weber's definition of class situation, the Mexican cartels would be part of the upper echelon. They not only have property and liquid capital equivalent to that of a large corporation, but they are also able to use that economic power to reproduce their wealth.

If Marx were analyzing the cartel, he would classify the top bosses only as "property owners" who exploit labor in exchange for profit. Weber, however, would point out the social complexities that are associated with this kind of wealth production. He would note that although the cartels may produce wealth equivalent to that of a corporation, they are limited by their low status honor.

The cartels maintain a lifestyle which is not shared by the "high class, high status" sector of the population. Expectations of blind loyalty, willingness to conduct and condone violence and acceptance of the cartel hierarchy are all characteristics of this "specific style of life" that Weber explains. The cartel community inhibits members from social mobility by inexplicably tying them to an image of violence and threatening death if disloyal. This ties into what Weber describes as a "closing character"<sup>2</sup> where community lifestyles create an exclusive social circle that, in this case, restricts social mobility. Due to the illegality of the cartel's production, they are seen as socially illegitimate and thus not recognized by any government institution as being legitimate holders of power.

Ultimately, Weber's theory can be applied to this contemporary example because while objectively they have enormous economic power, the cartel's low status honor puts limitations on their life chances.

## CONCLUSION

Marx and Weber both attempt to explain social stratification as it changes during industrialization and the creation of the German state. Weber identifies social stratification as being incredibly complex with social variables and property differentiation. The Mexican cartels, despite being a social anomaly that I'm sure Marx and Weber both would have a lot to say about, represent important features of Weber's social theory that I find are true today.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> Weber, Max. "Class, Status, Party." pp. 188.

