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# The Third Digital Divide

A Weberian Approach to Digital  
Inequalities

Massimo Ragnedda



# The Third Digital Divide

Drawing on the thought of Max Weber, in particular his theory of stratification, this book engages with the question of whether the digital divide simply extends traditional forms of inequality, or whether it also includes new forms of social exclusion, or perhaps manifests counter-trends that alleviate traditional inequalities whilst constituting new modalities of inequality. With attention to the manner in which social stratification in the digital age is reproduced and transformed online, the author develops an account of stratification as it exists in the digital sphere, advancing the position that, just as in the social sphere, inequalities in the online world go beyond the economic elements of inequality. As such, study of the digital divide should focus not simply on class dynamics or economic matters, but cultural aspects – such as status or prestige – and political aspects – such as group affiliations. Demonstrating the enduring relevance of Weber's distinctions with regard to social inequality, *The Third Digital Divide: A Weberian Approach to Digital Inequalities* explores the ways in which online activities and digital skills vary according to crucial sociological dimensions, explaining these in concrete terms in relation to the dynamics of social class, social status and power. As such, it will be of interest to social scientists with interests in sociological theory, the sociology of science and technology, and inequality and the digital divide.

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# Introduction

This book uses the theoretical framework developed by Weber to analyse the phenomena of the digital divide and digital inequalities in relation to social stratification.

The aim of this book is thus to sketch a concept of stratification and inequalities in the digital sphere, in order to clarify whether the digital divide simply extends traditional forms of inequality, or whether it also includes new forms, which might include counter-trends that alleviate traditional inequalities and/or which form new modalities of inequality. As we shall see, inequalities that exist in the digital sphere are certainly entangled with inequalities present in the social sphere.

The discussion will proceed from a theoretical perspective using Max Weber's theory of stratification in order to clarify how social stratification in the digital age is reproduced online. The main idea is that inequalities in the digital sphere are based on features that, just as in the social sphere, go beyond the economic aspects of inequality. To understand digital inequalities, the discussion should not focus only on class dynamics (economic aspects), but also status/prestige (cultural aspects) and group affiliations (political aspects). As in 'real life', social stratification in the digital sphere is the result of this complex interplay of three factors. These key distinctions Weber identified about social inequality are still significant in a digital age.

Thus, this book focuses on how online activities and digital skills vary according to crucial sociological dimensions, in order to explain these in concrete terms in relation to the dynamics of social class, social status and power. The Weberian approach, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, provides a richer understanding of both digital and social inclusion and exclusion that goes beyond a narrow class-based analysis. Furthermore, I shall discuss how the trajectories of citizens' lives – what Weber defined as 'life chances' – are affected by digital capital and Internet usage. Being on the wrong side of the digital divide may have seriously implications for individuals' lives and life chances. To put it differently, being excluded from the digital realm, or not being able to make a full use of the potentiality offered by information communication technologies (ICTs), may dramatically affect one's opportunities to gain access to valued outcomes.

## 2 Introduction

The capacity, or by contrast the incapacity, to access restricted and limited resources, opportunities, privileged positions and rewards in society is at the base of social inequalities (Grabb, 1990). Such phenomena have always intrigued sociologists from all over the world, and several different approaches might be used to grasp the issue. For instance, a functionalist approach stresses the inevitability of inequalities and then attempts to explain their functionality for the whole of society. This sees a system of inequalities at the base of the division of labour (Durkheim, 1984), based on skills and meritocracy. The approach, often used by the New Right movement (Murray, 1990 and Saunders, 1990), stresses the idea that society is meritocratic and inequalities are necessary (Davis and Moore, 1945). It was also at the base of neoliberal policies in the UK (Thatcher) and in the US (Reagan) in the 1980s. Such policies have dramatically influenced the structuration of social inequalities.

Another common approach used in explaining social inequalities is the Marxist approach, which basically explains inequalities as both a cause and a consequence of capitalism and greed. The focus is on the economic factor and on the division of society into two main macro classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. The first class will benefit the most from inequality by exploiting the proletariat. This exploitation is supported by the hegemonic process, namely the idea that the values of the ruling class are imposed as ideology upon a whole culture (Gramsci, 1971) or by the Ideological State Apparatus, namely the media, the family and the educational system (Althusser, 1989). Both these approaches might be used to explain social inequalities in the Internet age, and I shall briefly mention both of them throughout our discussion.

However, in order to explain digital inequalities, I shall mainly use the Weberian approach, for several reasons which I will make clear below. Often, Weber is seen in opposition to Marx. However, as noted by several scholars, the Weberian approach could be seen as a positive interpretation of Marx, elaborating a constructive critique and an extension of Marx's view (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 63; Sayer, 1991: 3–4). In the view of some, Weber may have 'spent his life having a posthumous dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx' (Salomon, 1945: 596). The influence of Marx on Weber's theories is evident. However, the difference between these two authors becomes clear when discussing the theory of class: we may say that the Weberian theory of class is at the same time a distinct alternative to and a departure from Marx's theory. His approach seems more complex than Marx's, for whom economy and materialism comprise the base upon which social life is built. Although Weber is against this Marxist simplification, since he argues that social processes are always complex (Bendix, 1960: 6) and cannot be reduced to only economic factors, he often tends to discuss inequality and the concept of class in a 'Marxian voice' (Wright, 1997: 29–30). As Collins (1986: 37) notes, Weber was 'critically respectful' of the Marxist idea. Based on various sources and evidence, he proposed a modification of Marx and early Marxism.

To return to our theme, why is the Weberian approach appropriate here to understand the digital divide and related issues? I first started to think about

this book during the commemorations of 150 years since the birth of Max Weber (2014). I have always thought that a knowledge of the ‘classic’ fathers of sociology is important to understand and decode contemporary phenomena. My reasoning has been cleverly expressed by Italo Calvino (1999: 3), who suggests that ‘a classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading’. Weber’s analysis of social structure could be seen in this light. Weber must therefore be considered a living thinker rather than an old and dead theorist, and he remains a leading influence in social science. Paraphrasing Calvino (1999: 5), Weber’s classical approach has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers. Knowledge of his methodology and theoretical framework is still crucial to interpret and decipher the contemporary society in which we are living.

Weber’s thought is a keystone in modern social theory and his thought is a deep reservoir of fresh inspiration. Of course, the social, political, economic and technological world which generated his view was completely different from the one in which we are living today. However, like the work of all classic thinkers, his theoretical analysis is still vividly alive and useful to understand the world today. Max Weber’s mode of analysis can be highly stimulating in addressing social inequalities, usually described as the unequal distribution of opportunities, rewards, goods, wealth, education, healthcare and punishments for different socially defined categories of persons within a group or society. Each society exhibits inequalities among individuals and groups, the sedimentation of social history, which give rise to social strata in the practice of social relations, notably regarding access to social rewards such as money (class), prestige (status group) and power (political party). One of the challenges in this present work is to apply Weber’s theoretical approach to digital inequalities. The question is how to use this approach to understand digital inequalities, and how to readjust and reinvigorate it in the completely different economic, social, cultural and technological context of our contemporary world.

So, once again, why might a sociological approach be used to study the digital divide? More specifically, why might we use a Weberian approach to study digital inequalities? First, sociologists are adept at examining inequalities as they exist in the world at large (Hadden, 1997); this is relevant for the digital divide because it deals with the inequalities that exist in the digital sphere. Second, the digital divide should be seen as a social rather than a technological issue, and as such should be understood through sociological eyes. What is interesting and odd at the same time is that, although the digital divide and digital inequalities are fundamental aspects of social inequity in the information age, they have received less sociological attention than they should have done. Of course, a lot has been done, for example in the work of DiMaggio *et al.* (2001), Witte and Mannon (2010), Van Dijk (2005), Stern (2010), and Ragnedda and Muschert (2013), but a lot more is possible. Much more, indeed, should be understood and learned about how such inequalities are produced and reproduced in the digital realm. More importantly, much

#### 4 *Introduction*

more should be done to explain how social and digital inequalities are intertwined and how they mutually and reciprocally influence each other.

This book, despite all its limitations, attempts to fill this gap in the literature, proposing a specific approach to study digital inequalities: a Weberian perspective. The key theoretical questions this book is going to investigate are:

- How does the digital divide influence social stratification, and, reflexively, how does social stratification influence the development of the digital divide?
- Is the digital divide creating new forms of social exclusion, such as forms of digital discrimination or digital exclusion?
- Do traditional forms of inequality simply replicate themselves in the digital sphere, or does the digital divide operate under its own dynamics?

In order to attempt to provide answers to these fundamental questions, I think Max Weber's theory of stratification offers the best perspective. Analysing, from a theoretical point of view, how social stratification in the digital age is reproduced not only by class dynamics (economic aspects), but also by status/prestige (cultural aspects) and in group affiliations (political aspects), is useful for a better understanding of digital inequalities. The digital divide should not only be approached from the point of view of economic structure (within the state and between states); we should also consider the broader axes of stratification, such as the social conditions of stratified relations, in order to understand the influence of class, status and power in creating the digital inequalities identified as the basis of digital discrimination. A nuanced approach to digital inequalities might also include aspects of social stratification in the digital sphere which relate to differential rewards experienced by different status groups and individuals in such areas as market influence, political power and social status/prestige. It should reflect also on the fact that Internet use tends to reproduce online particular attitudes towards consumption or other distinctive lifestyle markers. These elements, as we shall see, characterize distinctive status groups, even in the digital realm.

My discussion of how the digital divide influences social stratification, and, reflexively, how social stratification influences the development of the digital divide will reveal the bi-directional nature of influence between social and digital inequalities which mutually and reciprocally influence each other. I shall address the digital divide in broad terms, attempting to explain why online inequalities are reproducing social inequalities, rather than mitigating them.

This is therefore a book about inequalities and how they are reproduced online, what social consequences they have, what patterns they follow, and what relations they have with offline inequalities. More specifically, it is about the multidimensionality and complexity of the digital divide, and the need to go beyond the binary division between those who access and those who do not access the Internet. This polar division is what is called the 'first level' of digital divide. Scholars and researchers, as we shall see, have also addressed

the second level, which includes digital skills and purpose and autonomy of use. These elements make using the Internet a qualitatively distinctive experience, and underline its inherent inequalities. However, this book is focused on what I shall define as the third level of digital divide, namely the benefits that one gets from different access (first level) and different use (second level) of the Internet, and the ability to exploit these benefits in a digital-driven market to improve one's life chances.

As we shall see, individuals' access to and use of ICTs are shaped by the social structure (in Weberian terms) of which they are part. Hence, this book focuses on the third level of digital divide, the life chances that the access to and use of ICTs might give to users/citizens in the offline realm. This book looks at the social consequences of the use of ICTs and the rise of digital stratification. It is less concerned with how we access online resources, and more with the interrelations between online and offline, digital and social inequalities. This approach does not intend to deny the importance of the first level of digital divide, nor that of the more sophisticated second level; however, it holds that the third level is more interesting because it includes both the first and second levels and adds a further dimension. To put it differently, this book is more interested in the vicious circle between social and digital stratification than with digital skills and digital access. The purpose is to explain not only the antecedents of inequality that might affect access to and use of the Internet, but also the opportunities to improve life chances that are provided by such access and use. This analysis will be done through the Weberian lens, applying the multidimensional approach of social stratification to the study of digital inequalities, and analysing how different access to and use of the Internet affect the life chances of individuals.

I think that to broaden the scope of studies in digital inequalities, a new analysis based on Max Weber's would be useful in order to open up a new set of questions about the social stratification of the digital sphere. The goal is to identify digital stratification and digital inequalities, and read them through a Weberian lens. Acknowledging the complexity of the situation, I adapt Weber's perspectives on stratification to the dynamics observed in contemporary digital spheres. Thus, this book clarifies the importance of studying the phenomena of the digital divide from a sociological perspective. The core idea is that social inequalities represent an issue typically studied by sociology, and that the Weberian approach is pertinent and useful in order to shed light on this subject. With this idea in mind, I shall explore from a theoretical point of view the social inequalities prevalent in the age of the Internet, going beyond the economic role of social class to focus on the broader dynamics of stratification described by Max Weber. The key distinctions Weber identified about inequality continue to be relevant in a digital age, although this perspective has thus far remained underdeveloped. My aim is thus threefold: 1) to initiate a scholarly discussion of the importance of class and group affiliation in a postmodern society, specifically in relation to digital inequalities; 2) to explore the importance of status groups in digital participation/exclusion; and, 3) to