In a departure from the focus on the underlying religious roots of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber takes on issues of the organization of power in two essays, “The Distribution of Power Within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party” and “Bureaucracy.” We will first approach these two essays as distinct selections, and then later to return to the question, “How do power and authority become organized in modern society?” in order to examine the points of intersection between the two essays. We shall examine both essays within the framework of a larger theoretical discussion about modern society.

In order to explicate Weber’s theoretical arguments we must first look at his definition of power. He defines power as, “The chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.” (926) With this as a basis of discussion, we turn to his essay on class, status and party.

In their book, *The Discovery of Society*, Randall Collins and Michael Makowsky said, “Weber saw society as a complex and ever-shifting interplay of forces. Political stratification is influenced by economic alignments and vice-versa; both these interact with cultural stratification.” (1998, McGraw Hill 6th Edition, p123) This concept of an interplay of forces is seen even in the title of “Class, Status, Party,” in which Weber asks the question, “How can one categorize the different manifestations of power in society?” In this essay, Weber presents a clear theoretical argument about the different spheres of power in society – economic, political, and social. He also provides explicit definitions of all his terms, including power, social honor, status groups, classes, and parties. It is very important that Weber gives such lucid definitions since the subtle differences in these terms are crucial to his argument about how power is organized.
We can picture Weber’s theory as a Venn diagram with the economic, social, and political spheres of power, creating a central locus of power for the individual who has all three of these components (i.e., a man who benefited economically from inheritance laws that originated in the political sphere, and was inducted into a highly ranking social order via an elite education and upbringing, and who was thereby poised to bring his considerable resources to bear on securing political power for himself). In the economic sphere, groups of people who share similar life chances in their ability to acquire goods and income, based on their ownership (or lack thereof) of property, and have similar experiences in the level of their involvement in the commodity or labor market form the different classes. (927) In the social sphere, people are stratified by status, and in the political sphere individuals are grouped into different parties.

Power in one sphere may or may not amount to power in another sphere: “Social honor, or prestige, may even be the basis of economic power…. Power, as well as honor, may be guaranteed by the legal order, but…it is not their primary source. The legal order is rather an additional factor that enhances the chance to hold on to power or honor; but it cannot always secure them…The social order and the economic order are related in a similar way to the legal order…Of course, the status order is strongly influenced by [the economic order], and in turn reacts upon it.” (927) Here, Weber suggests a web of influences that act interdependently rather than antagonistically; in other words, class would tend to reinforce rather than threaten the status hierarchy.

Weber also acknowledges that the reordering of power in one sphere can potentially collapse the order of power in another sphere: “The status order would be threatened at its very root if mere economic acquisition and naked economic power still bearing the origin could bestow upon anyone who was won them the same or even greater honor as the vested interests claim for themselves.” (936) These three spheres affect one another both directly and indirectly, and while power in one sphere does not necessarily constitute power in another, having power in all three spheres is instrumental to Weber’s understanding of self realization, particularly in modern society.

The primary difference between class and status groups in modern society is their relationship to market goods. Weber writes: “With some over-simplification, one might thus say that classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and
acquisition of goods; whereas status groups are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life (p937, original emphasis).” However, Weber criticizes the Marxian idea that class interests are the only determinants of social order, to the exclusion of individual interests and actors. (930)

Also, within Weber’s framework, the potential for class mobility arises periodically: “When the bases of the acquisition and distribution of goods are relatively stable, stratification by status is favored. Every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground.” (938) If the economic situation of a society is in flux, and the structures of the means of production are changing shape and changing hands, it is easier to achieve class mobility. Once this occurs, the boundaries of status are pushed, as individuals who have experienced a change in class try to infiltrate different status groups (which are, by definition, resistant to change).

Weber attempts to show how power is perpetuated by a group when it establishes a systematic form of administration of duties throughout the society in his essay, “Bureaucracy.” Here, Weber continues his discussion of power, answering the questions that seem, logically, to pose themselves at the end of our last reading: Now that individuals have power, how is it legitimized in modern society? How is it perpetuated? The short answer is, “bureaucracy.” Throughout this reading, Weber compares the bureaucratic nature of the West to what he considers to be less successful civilizations throughout the world. “Bureaucracy…is fully developed in political and ecclesiastical communities only in the modern state.” (956) Here is another instance in which Weber seems to equate modernity with democracy. He goes on to note, “The progress of bureaucratization within the state administration itself is a phenomenon paralleling the development of democracy.” (984)

These states developed systems that ensured that the society functioned efficiently. The system of bureaucracy has three main rules: first, the activities are regularized and systematized in a hierarchical structure. Second, those who participate in the structure are given state sanctioned power, i.e. the authority to give instructions to their subordinates as to how to carry out their duties. Third, the system was organized in
a way such that people working within it were not fundamental to its operation, that is, the duties would be fulfilled regardless of the person carrying them out.

These three factors made bureaucracy different from past systems of administration, where there was a heavy personal involvement and in the conducting state and private duties. Weber said, “When not only economic but also lordly [political] rights are bestowed [upon the official] to exercise on his own, and when this is associated with the stipulation of personal services to the lord to be rendered in return, a further step away from salaried bureaucracy has been taken.” (967) In other words, bureaucracies function within a strict, impersonal hierarchy that does not acknowledge any status outside of its own hierarchy.

Weber also suggests that bureaucracy is not only a central feature in the way that modern society organizes power, but that it also facilitates capitalism and democracy. “Once fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy. Bureaucracy is the means of transforming social action into rationally organized action.” (987; original emphasis) Weber argues that bureaucracy is only fully realized in the modern state (which he often equates with democracy). Without a ruling noble class, democratic leadership falls on the shoulders of an equalized population. Bureaucracy supported democracy in that the impersonal nature and systematic form of bureaucracy destroyed the business and governmental relationships based on nepotism.

Weber also showed that capitalism and bureaucracy were mutually reinforcing. For example, Weber points out that “the advance of the bureaucratic structure rests upon ‘technical’ superiority,” (987), which comes from capitalism. In places where modern capitalism could flourish fastest because there was no entrenched aristocracy to destroy, bureaucracy was able to root itself more quickly and more firmly (i.e., the United States, as compared with England). Modern capitalism and bureaucracy, both systematic and impersonal, each allowed the other to flourish.

Having treated these two pieces separately, we return to the central issue of the paper, namely the question, “How do power and authority become organized in modern society?” The two essays are superficially quite distinct, and our relating them requires somewhat of an interpretive leap. However, we conclude that Weber’s answer to the above question is, essentially, “Bureaucracy.” In a modern society, the three
complementary spheres of power (class, status, party) are mediated through an overarching, rationalistic bureaucracy, which allows the struggles between the spheres to exist within a stable society.

The spheres of power he delineates in his shorter essay, however, do not seem to be adequately integrated into his theory on bureaucracy. Furthermore, the writing he puts forth on bureaucracy is more of a detailed description of that power structure than an actual theory. While “Bureaucracy” provides ample historical comparison as empirical evidence for his explanation of the functioning of bureaucracies, the essay lacks adequate descriptions of causal mechanisms.

One point of disagreement in our group centered on Weber’s treatment of ethnic segregation in society and the distinctions he makes between status groups and castes. Some felt his treatment of ethnicity in his discussion of groups was inadequate, although it was agreed that this may have been due largely to fact that this topic was a secondary stream within Weber’s main argument. However, the few comments he does make on caste and ethnicity have interesting implications for the study of the organization of power in society today.