

Lecture Notes on Max Weber

Verstehen: German word for "understanding." Used to describe Weber's approach to sociological explanation, which emphasizes the need to develop an empathic understanding of the subjective meanings and motives of social action.

Ideal types: (Over)simplified models of various types of social action that seek to capture the essential logic or rationality of those actions. These serve as heuristic devices for making deductions or formulating hypotheses. Real events always deviate from ideal types because of the complex interaction of different motives and the modifying effect of non-rational action.

Fact/value distinction: Unlike many interpretative theorists, Weber maintains that facts can and should be kept separate from values. In principle, facts can be determined objectively by science. Values are a matter of cultural norms or personal faith, the truth of which cannot be decided by science.

Types of social action:

- **Rational action:**
 - **Purposive (means-ends) rationality:** action that rationally calculates and selects among different means according to which best or most efficiently attains the actor's chosen goals.
 - **Value rationality:** action that done in conformity with absolute moral or ethical values, independently of any assessment of the probable success or ultimate consequences of such action.
- **Non-rational action:**
 - **Affective (emotional) action:** action determined by the emotional state of the actor.
 - **Traditional (habitual) action:** action determined by the actor's habitual or customary ways of behaving.

Types of legitimate authority

- **Legal (rational) authority:** based on a belief in the legality of rules or laws and the right of officials to enforce those rules or laws (e.g., a judge or policeman). Legal authority is the characteristic form of authority exercised by modern bureaucracies, where orders are given by duly appointed (or elected) officials, based on written rules and regulations.
- **Traditional authority:** based on the belief in the validity or sacred quality of long-standing traditions (e.g. a monarchy or rule by village elders).
- **Charismatic authority:** based on devotion to the sacred or super-human qualities of an extraordinarily charismatic leader (e.g., a Ghandi or Hitler).

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Modern capitalism is defined (for Weber) by a historically unique "spirit" (which he calls "innerworldly asceticism") that motivates a particular form of social action. This spirit combines: (1) an passionate pursuit of unlimited wealth, with (2) a renunciation of worldly pleasure through consumption of wealth. These motives lead to the rational reorganization of production based on rigorous calculation, maximization of productive efficiency, and high levels of reinvestment. This contrasts with economic motives in pre-capitalist societies, where people are usually content with a level of production that meets basic needs, consume most of what they produce, and prefer leisure over increased income or production.

Protestantism and capitalism: statistical association between Protestantism and capitalism. We might imagine that capitalism (materialism) would only flourish where there is a weakening of religion (idealism), yet the opposite appears true. Protestantism (particularly Calvinism) represented an intensification, not a relaxation, of religious discipline. On the surface, Protestantism does not appear sympathetic toward capitalism (e.g., condemns usury). What then is the connection? Weber says the connection is indirect and psychological, rather than direct and logical.

Major tenets of Calvinism:

- all-powerful God; world exists for Gods glory, not for human purposes
- purposes of God are incomprehensible to mankind
- salvation cannot be achieved by good works or ritual absolution
- predestination: only a few are chosen in advance for salvation

Psychological results:

- extreme anxiety over salvation; search for a "sign" of salvation
- antagonism to sensuous culture; denial of pleasure
- economic success seen as a possible sign of salvation
- treating the ethical pursuit of one's vocation as a religious "calling"
- intense worldly activity; positive evaluation of economic pursuits as long as they avoid luxury ("innerworldly asceticism")

Weber's conclusion: Religious value commitments (Protestantism) provided the missing link that explains why capitalism emerged in the West at a particular point in history and not elsewhere. Once it was well established, however, capitalism became self-sustaining and no longer needed this religious motivation.

Criticisms of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis:

- mistaken about timing (capitalism often preceded Protestantism)
- confuses cause and effect (Protestantism the effect, not the cause)
- exaggerates theological differences between Protestantism and Catholicism
- naively accepts the piousness of early capitalists
- relative commercial success of Protestants (and Jews) more likely explained by their exclusion from traditional avenues of gaining status
- downplays structural preconditions for capitalist industry

Weber's later writings: Less emphasis placed on the role of Protestant beliefs in the origins of modern capitalism. More attention given to structural preconditions:

- bureaucratic state pacified large territories, broke down market barriers, standardized taxation and currency, instituted rationally calculable law
- church and state bureaucracies promoted literacy and technologies of writing and record keeping
- independent towns broadened rights of citizenship, freeing people from feudal obligations and allowing more autonomous economic activity

Economy and Society

Bureaucracy

- **Characteristics of bureaucratic organization**
 - hierarchical organization.
 - official actions bound by written rules and subject to systematic control from above.
 - functionaries have limited and well-defined spheres of competence and authority.
 - candidates selected on the basis of technical qualifications.
 - officials salaried and have no ownership rights over their job or the means of administration that they employ.
 - positions constitute a stage in an individual's career.
- **Advance of bureaucracy:** based on its superiority as efficient means of large-scale organization. Weber believes it is the only form of organization capable of the immense tasks of coordination necessary in modern industrial capitalism. The expanding range of administrative tasks and need for coordination in a socialist economy would create an even higher degree of bureaucracy.

- **Rationalization** (the predominance of purposive or means-ends rationality) in modern society. Rationalization is not limited to the state and the economy. Weber also talks about legal, religious, scientific, and cultural rationalization. Weber speaks of this trend as the "iron cage." He believes that it undermines some of the fundamental values of Western society (individualism, spontaneity, autonomy of action) in the name of increasing efficiency. He also argues that as the means of coordinated action become ever more efficient (formal rationality) the ultimate ends of human action (substantive rationality) get lost sight of.

Class, Status, and Party: Bases of social inequality and collective action

- **Classes:** social groups that experience common "life chances" based on the market returns to their assets (labor, skills, forms of property). Only rarely do classes become bases for collective action.
- **Status groups:** groups that are ranked in terms of their social honor or prestige and that commonly use some identifiable characteristic (race, language, religion, etc.) as the basis for differentiating themselves from others. Typically have high levels of social interaction within group and practice a common lifestyle. A frequent basis of collective action.
- **Parties:** voluntary associations that form (sometimes on a class basis, sometimes on the basis of status groups, and sometimes as purely opportunistic coalitions) for the intended purpose of acquiring control over authoritative institutions, especially the state. The state's power is based, first and foremost, on its monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.