The Sociology of Max Weber

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Max Weber (1864-1920)

- According to the standard interpretation, Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of social action.
- His initial theoretical focus is on the subjective meaning that humans attach to their actions and interactions within specific social contexts.
Social Action

In this connection, Weber distinguishes between four major types of social action:

– Zweckrational
– Wertrational
– Affective action
– Traditional action
Zweckrational can be defined as action in which the means to attain a particular goal are rationally chosen. It can be roughly translated as "technocratic thinking."
Social Action

Wertrational, or value-oriented rationality, is characterized by striving for a goal which in itself may not be rational, but which is pursued through rational means. The values come from within an ethical, religious, philosophical or even holistic context--they are not rationally "chosen."
Social Action

Affective action is based on the emotional state of the person rather than in the rational weighing of means and ends. Sentiments are powerful forces in motivating human behavior.
Social Action

The final type Weber labels "traditional action." This is action guided by custom or habit. People engage in this type of action often unthinkingly, because it is simply "always done."
Social Action

- Weber's typology is intended to be a comprehensive list of the types of meaning men and women give to their conduct across sociocultural systems. As an advocate of multiple causation of human behavior, Weber was well aware that most behavior is caused by a mix of these motivations.
He developed the typology because he was primarily concerned with modern society and how it differs from societies of the past.

He proposed that the basic distinguishing feature of modern society was a characteristic shift in the motivation of individual behaviors.
Social Action

In modern society the efficient application of means to ends (zweckrational) has come to dominate and replace other springs of social behavior.
Social Action

His classification of types of action provides a basis for his investigation of the social evolutionary process in which behavior had come to be increasingly dominated by goal-oriented rationality (zweckrational) -- less and less by tradition, values or emotions.
Social Action

- The major thrust of his work attempts to identify the factors that have brought about this "rationalization" of the West.
- While his sociology begins with the individual motivators of social action, Weber does not stay exclusively focused on either the idealist or the social-psychological level.
Social Action

While he proposed that the basic distinguishing feature of modern society was best viewed in terms of this characteristic shift in motivation, he rooted that shift in the growth of bureaucracy and industrialism.
Ideal Type

- Weber's discussion of social action is an example of the use of an ideal type. An ideal type provides the basic method for historical-comparative study.

- It is not meant to refer to the "best" or to some moral ideal, but rather to typical or "logically consistent" features of social institutions or behaviors.
Ideal Type

An ideal type is an analytical construct that serves as a measuring rod for social observers to determine the extent to which concrete social institutions are similar and how they differ from some defined measure.
Ideal Type

The ideal type involves determining the features of a social institution that would be present if the institution were a logically consistent whole, not affected by other institutions, concerns and interests.
Ideal Type

- The ideal type never corresponds to concrete reality but is a description to which we can compare reality.
Bureaucracy

Weber's focus on the trend of rationalization led him to concern himself with the operation and expansion of large-scale enterprises in both the public and private sectors of modern societies.
Bureaucracy

- Bureaucracy can be considered to be a particular case of rationalization, or rationalization applied to human organization.
- Bureaucratic coordination of human action, Weber believed, is the distinctive mark of modern social structures.
Bureaucracy

In order to study these organizations, both historically and in contemporary society, Weber developed the characteristics of an ideal-type bureaucracy:

- Hierarchy of authority
- Impersonality
- Written rules of conduct
- Promotion based on achievement
- Specialized division of labor
- Efficiency
Bureaucracy

- According to Weber, bureaucracies are goal-oriented organizations designed according to rational principles in order to efficiently attain their goals.
- Offices are ranked in a hierarchical order, with information flowing up the chain of command, directives flowing down.
Bureaucracy

- Operations of the organizations are characterized by impersonal rules that explicitly state duties, responsibilities, standardized procedures and conduct of office holders.

- Offices are highly specialized. Appointments to these offices are made according to specialized qualifications rather than ascribed criteria.
Bureaucracy

All of these ideal characteristics have one goal, to promote the efficient attainment of the organization's goals.
Bureaucracy

- The bureaucratic coordination of the action of large numbers of people has become the dominant structural feature of modern societies.

- It is only through this organizational device that large-scale planning and coordination, both for the modern state and the modern economy, become possible.
Bureaucracy

- The consequences of the growth in the power and scope of these organizations is key in understanding our world.
Authority

- Weber's discussion of authority relations also provides insight into what is happening in the modern world.
  - On what basis do men and women claim authority over others?
  - Why do men and women give obedience to authority figures?
Authority

Again, he uses the ideal type to begin to address these questions. Weber distinguished three main types of authority:

– Traditional Authority
– Rational-legal Authority
– Charismatic
Authority

Rational legal authority is anchored in impersonal rules that have been legally established. This type of authority (which parallels the growth of zweckrational) has come to characterize social relations in modern societies.
Authority

Traditional authority often dominates pre-modern societies. It is based on the belief in the sanctity of tradition, of "the eternal yesterday."
Authority

Finally, charismatic authority rests on the appeal of leaders who claim allegiance because of the force of their extraordinary personalities.
Authority

Again, it should be kept in mind that Weber is describing an ideal type; he was aware that in empirical reality mixtures will be found in the legitimization of authority.
Causality

- Weber firmly believed in the multi-causality of social phenomenon. He expressed this causality in terms of probabilities.
- Prediction becomes possible, Weber believed, only within a system of theory that focus our concern on a few social forces out of the wealth of forces and their interactions that make up empirical reality.
Causality

- Within such constraints, causal certainty in social research is not attainable (nor is it attainable outside the laboratory in natural sciences).
- The best that can be done is to focus our theories on the most important relationships between social forces, and to forecast from that theory in terms of probabilities.
Causality

- Weber's system invokes both ideas and material factors as interactive components in the sociocultural evolutionary process.
- Weber attempted to show that the relations between ideas and social structures were multiple and varied, and that causal connections went in both directions.
Causality

While Weber basically agreed with Marx that economic factors were key in understanding the social system, he gave much greater emphasis to the influence and interaction of ideas and values on sociocultural evolution.
The Protestant Ethic

- Weber's concern with the meaning that people give to their actions allowed him to understand the drift of historical change.
- He believed that rational action within a system of rational-legal authority is at the heart of modern society.
The Protestant Ethic

- His sociology was first and foremost an attempt to explore and explain this shift from traditional to rational action.
  - What was it about the West, he asks, that is causing this shift?
  - In an effort to understand these causes, Weber examined the religious and economic systems of many civilizations.
The Protestant Ethic

- Weber came to believe that the rationalization of action can only be realized when traditional ways of life are abandoned.
- Weber's task was to uncover the forces in the West that caused people to abandon their traditional religious value orientation and encouraged them to develop a desire for acquiring goods and wealth.
After careful study, Weber came to the hypothesis that the Protestant ethic broke the hold of tradition while it encouraged men to apply themselves rationally to their work.
The Protestant Ethic

- Calvinism, he found, had developed a set of beliefs around the concept of predestination.

- It was believed by followers of Calvin that one could not do good works or perform acts of faith to assure your place in heaven.
The Protestant Ethic

You were either among the "elect" (in which case you were in) or you were not. However, wealth was taken as a sign (by you and your neighbors) that you were one of the God's elect, thereby providing encouragement for people to acquire wealth.
The Protestant Ethic

The Protestant ethic therefore provided religious sanctions that fostered a spirit of rigorous discipline, encouraging men to apply themselves rationally to acquire wealth.
The Protestant Ethic

Weber studied non-Western cultures as well. He found that several of these pre-industrial societies had the technological infrastructure and other necessary preconditions to begin capitalism and economic expansion, however, capitalism failed to emerge.
The Protestant Ethic

- The only force missing were the positive sanctions to abandon traditional ways.
- While Weber does not believe that the Protestant ethic was the only cause of the rise of capitalism, he believed it to be a powerful force in fostering its emergence.
Oligarchy

Weber noted the dysfunctions of bureaucracy in terms of the impact that it had on individuals. Its major advantage, efficiency in attaining goals, makes it unwieldly in dealing with individual cases. The impersonality, so important in attaining efficiency of the organization, is dehumanizing.
Oligarchy

- But the concern over bureaucracy's threat to the members of a particular organization has served to overshadow its effects on the larger society.

- Weber was very concerned about the impact that rationalization and bureaucratization had on sociocultural systems.
Oligarchy

- By its very nature bureaucracy generates an enormous degree of unregulated and often unperceived social power.

- Those who control these organizations, Weber warned, control the quality of our life, and they are largely self-appointed leaders.
Oligarchy

- Bureaucracy tends to result in oligarchy, or rule by the few officials at the top of the organization.
- In a society dominated by large formal organizations, there is a danger that social, political and economic power will become concentrated in the hands of the few who hold high positions in the most influential of these organizations.
Oligarchy

- While it is easy to see oligarchy within formal organizations, Weber's views on the inevitability of oligarchy within whole societies are a little more subtle.

- The social structure of modern society has become dominated by bureaucracy. Bureaucracies are necessary to provide the coordination and control so desperately needed by our complex society (and huge populations).
Oligarchy

But while modern societies are dependent on formal organization, bureaucracy tends to undermine both human freedom and democracy in the long-run.
Oligarchy

Those on top of bureaucratic hierarchies can command vast resources in pursuit of their interests. This power is often unseen and unregulated, which gives the elite at the top of these hierarchies vast social, economic, and political power.
Oligarchy

- The problem is further compounded by huge corporations, economic bureaucracies that have tremendous impact over our lives, an impact over which we have little control.

- Not only do these economic bureaucracies affect us directly, they also affect our governments--organizations supposedly designed to regulate them.
Rationalization

The rationalization process is the practical application of knowledge to achieve a desired end. It leads to efficiency, coordination, and control over both the physical and the social environment.
Rationalization

- It is the guiding principle behind bureaucracy and the increasing division of labor.
- It has led to the unprecedented increase in both the production and distribution of goods and services.
Rationalization

- It is also associated with secularization, depersonalization, and oppressive routine.

- Increasingly, human behavior is guided by observation, experiment and reason (zweckrational) to master the natural and social environment to achieve a desired end.
Rationalization

- Weber's general theory of rationalization (of which bureaucratization is but a particular case) refers to increasing human mastery over the natural and social environment.
- In turn, these changes in social structure have changed human character through changing values, philosophies, and beliefs.
Rationalization

Such superstructural norms and values as individualism, efficiency, self-discipline, materialism, and calculability (all of which are subsumed under Weber's concept of zweckrational) have been encouraged by the bureaucratization process.
Rationalization

Weber came to believe that bureaucracy and rationalization were rapidly replacing all other forms of organization and thought. They formed a stranglehold on all sectors of Western society.
Rationalization is the most general element of Weber's theory. He identifies rationalization with an increasing division of labor, bureaucracy and mechanization.
Irrationality

- Since it is clear that modern societies are so pervasively dominated by bureaucracy it is crucial to understand why this enormous power is often used for ends that are counter to the interests and needs of people.

- Why is it that "as rationalization increases, the irrational grows in intensity"?
Irrationality

Again, the rationalization process is the increasing dominance of zweckrational action over rational action based on values, or actions motivated by traditions and emotions. Zweckrational can best be understood as "technocratic thinking," in which the goal is simply to find the most efficient means to whatever ends are defined as important by those in power.
Irrationality

- Technocratic thinking can be contrasted with wertrational, which involves the assessment of goals and means in terms of ultimate human values such as social justice, peace, and human happiness.
Irrationality

Weber maintained that even though a bureaucracy is highly rational in the formal sense of technical efficiency, it does not follow that it is also rational in the sense of the moral acceptability of its goals or the means used to achieve them.
Irrationality

Nor does an exclusive focus on the goals of the organization necessarily coincide with the broader goals of society as a whole. It often happens that the single-minded pursuit of practical goals can actually undermine the foundations of the social order.
Irrationality

What is good for the bureaucracy is not always good for the society as a whole—and often, in the long term, is not good for the bureaucracy either.
Irrationality

The fact that individual officials have specialized and limited responsibility and authority within the organization means that they are unlikely to raise basic questions regarding the moral implications of the overall operation of the organization.
Irrationality

Under the rule of specialization, society becomes more and more intricate and interdependent, but with less common purpose. The community disintegrates because it loses its common bond. The emphasis in bureaucracies is on getting the job done in the most efficient manner possible.
Irrationality

Consideration of what impact organizational behavior might have on society as a whole, on the environment, or on the consumer simply does not enter into the calculation.
Irrationality

The problem is further compounded by the decline of many traditional institutions such as the family, community, and religion, which served to bind pre-industrial man to the interests of the group.
Irrationality

Rationalization causes the weakening of traditional and religious moral authority (secularization); the values of efficiency and calculability predominate. In an advanced industrial-bureaucratic society, everything becomes a component of the expanding machine, including human beings.
Irrationality

The result is a seeming paradox--bureaucracies, the epitome of rationalization, acting in very irrational ways.

- Thus we have economic bureaucracies in pursuit of profit that deplete and pollute the environment upon which they are based;
Irrationality

- Political bureaucracies, set up to protect our civil liberties, that violate them with impunity;
- Agricultural bureaucracies (educational, government, and business) set up to help the farmer, that end up putting millions of these same farmers out of business;
Irrationality

- Service bureaucracies designed to care for and protect the elderly, that routinely deny service and actually engage in abuse.

- The irrationality of bureaucratic institutions is a major factor in understanding contemporary society.
Irrationality

- Weber called this formal rationalization as opposed to substantive rationality (the ability to anchor actions in the consideration of the whole).
- The irrationality of bureaucratic institutions is a major factor in understanding contemporary society.
Weber and Marx

- Weber believed that Marxist theory was too simplistic, reducing all to a single economic cause.
- However, Weber does not attempt to refute Marx, rather he can be interpreted as an attempt to round out Marx's economic determinism.
Weber and Marx

Weber believed that the alienation documented by Marx had little to do with the ownership of the mode of production, but was a consequence of bureaucracy and the rationalization of social life.
Weber and Marx

Marx asserted that capitalism has led to the "expropriation" of the worker from the mode of production. He believed that the modern worker is not in control of his fate, is forced to sell his labor (and thus his self) to private capitalists.
Weber and Marx

Weber countered that loss of control at work was an inescapable result of any system of rationally coordinated production.
Weber and Marx

Weber argued that men could no longer engage in socially significant action unless they joined a large-scale organization.
Weber and Marx

In joining organizations they would have to sacrifice their personal desires and goals to the impersonal goals and procedures of the organization itself. By doing so, they would be cut off from a part of themselves, they would become alienated.
Weber and Marx

- Socialism and capitalism are both economic systems based on industrialization—the rational application of science, observation, and reason to the production of goods and services.

- Both capitalism and socialism are forms of a rational organization of economic life to control and coordinate this production.
Weber and Marx

Socialism is predicated on government ownership of the economy to provide the coordination to meet the needs of people within society. If anything, Weber maintained, socialism would be even more rationalized, even more bureaucratic than capitalism. And thus, more alienating to human beings as well.
Social Evolution

According to Weber, because bureaucracy is a form of organization superior to all others, further bureaucratization and rationalization may be an inescapable fate.
Weber wrote of the evolution of an iron cage, a technically ordered, rigid, dehumanized society:
Social Evolution

"It is apparent that today we are proceeding towards an evolution which resembles (the ancient kingdom of Egypt) in every detail, except that it is built on other foundations, on technically more perfect, more rationalized, and therefore much more mechanized foundations. The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed?--for that is impossible, but: what will come of it."
Social Evolution

Weber feared that our probable future would be even more bureaucratized, an iron cage that limits individual human potential rather than a technological utopia that sets us free.
Social Evolution

While Weber had a foreboding of an "iron cage" of bureaucracy and rationality, he recognized that human beings are not mere subjects molded by sociocultural forces.
Social Evolution

We are both creatures and creators of sociocultural systems. And even in a sociocultural system that increasingly institutionalizes and rewards goal oriented rational behavior in pursuit of wealth and material symbols of status there are other possibilities:
Social Evolution

"No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals or, if neither, mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance..."
Social Evolution

“For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has obtained a level of civilization never before achieved' (Weber, 1904/1930: 181).