

Classical Sociological Theory
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Max Weber: Life and Intellectual Influences

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Max Weber: Life and Intellectual Influences



Welcome back to the class, we are starting the discussion on Max Weber, an extremely important thinker, a founding father of sociology and a German Sociologist. So, in this class we will be having a very brief discussion about his life and on the intellectual context and intellectual influences that shaped his theorizations, arguments and articulations about sociology.

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Here is the picture of Max Weber considered to be one of the most important trinitities of classical sociological theories along with Durkheim and Marx and as we discussed in the previous classes. Germany have produced some of the most outstanding thinkers and intellectuals and Max Weber is definitely one among them.

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- Born on April 21, 1864, in the city of Erfurt in Germany in a Protestant family.
- Later moved to Berlin as his father became active in politics in the city
- Weber joined University of Heidelberg and studied law
- He completed a PhD dissertation titled “The History of Trading Companies in the Middle Ages” and a postdoctoral thesis titled “Roman Agrarian History,” from the University of Berlin.
- Got married to his cousin Marianne Schnitger in 1892 and moved to Freiburg



He was born on April 21st 1864 in the city of Erfurt in Germany in a Protestant family and later they moved to Berlin as his father became active in politics in the city and Weber later joined University of Heidelberg and studied law and he completed a PhD dissertation titled “The History of Trading Companies in the Middle Ages” and a postdoctoral thesis titled “Roman Agrarian History,” from the University of Berlin.

He got married to his cousin Marianne Schnitger in 1892 and move to Freiburg. If you read the biographies of Weber, you would see that he had a very uneasy or a stressful relationship with his father and though his father was a protestant, he was the religious preacher belonging to protestant faith. His relationship in the family was quite stressful and tensed and Weber had quite a lot of very bad encounter with him throughout his life.

These incidents must have as had said to have influenced Weber in a very negative manner.

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- He had a mental breakdown in 1897 and incapacitated him for 5 years. In 1900, the University of Heidelberg retired Weber and he did not teach again for nearly two decades.
- He continued intellectual activities as a private scholar
- In 1918, Weber accepted an academic position at the University of Vienna and offered a course for the first time in 20 years.
- He passed away on June 14th 1920 due to pneumonia



He had a mental breakdown in 1897 and it seems that he had a very bitter fight, verbal fight with his father and then soon after that his father passed away and then Weber was put under so much of emotional stress about this whole thing and he had this mental breakdown and which incapacitated him for five years. He was unable to read or he was unable to think properly. He was completely out of his mind and in 1900, university of Heidelberg retired Weber and he did not teach again for nearly two decades and this is a very important piece of information. If you look into his life and career, we all know that two decades are extremely precious is it not, twenty years are extremely lengthy period in the academic career of any scholar.

Weber did not go back to active academic life for nearly two decades because of this mental turbulences and then emotional trauma and he continued his intellectual activities as a private scholar without officially admitting himself to affiliating himself to any college or universities. In 1918, Weber accepted an academic position at the University of Vienna and offered a course for the first time in last 20 years.

He passed away on June 14, 1920 due to pneumonia. We get to see this life of Weber as a person who was really traumatized by quite a lot of personal tragedies and emotional instabilities and turmoils. This is the personal side of the scholar and if you want to get more information, you must read up and then look up to his biography or to more information that is available on the internet.

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Intellectual Context and Influences



- He attempted to grasp the distinctiveness of capitalism and the modern state in the context of the peculiarities of nineteenth-century German political, economic and social development.
- Concerned with the question of democracy and the ideology of socialist parties in Germany
- He was struck by the spread of bureaucracy into all realms of life. from the government to the workers movement to capitalist enterprises and the analysis of bureaucracy became a major theme in his work.



Now, let us look at the intellectual context and the kind of influences. As in the case of previous Scholars like Durkheim and Marx, it is extremely important to understand the intellectual contexts or what are the intellectual influences that shaped the thinking of a particular scholar. We saw it in the case of Durkheim and Marx. For example Marx's thoughts were heavily influenced by Hegelian idea of dialectical idealism.

Similarly Weber also was the product of a particular time, his thinking and arguments were directly responding to the then existed socio-political as well as intellectual context of Germany. Every scholar engages in a very dialogical manner, in a dialectical manner with the kind of existing intellectual atmosphere and then tries to make sense of that.

So is the case with the Weber. He attempted to grasp the distinctiveness of German capitalism and the modern state in the context of the peculiarities of the 19th century German political, economic and social development. As I mentioned he was somebody true to any intellectuals who are extremely sensitive to the kind of larger transformations happening around them, Weber too also was a very keen observer of the kind of things that are happening.

He was specifically interested in the question of the distinctiveness of capitalism that was emerging or that had kind of emerged as a nascent form in Germany and the modern state in the context of the peculiarities of 19th century German political, economic and social development. He was concerned with the questions of Democracy and the ideology of the Socialist parties in Germany.

Because these were the important political projects that were going on, political dynamics that were unfolding in his country and he must be stuck by the spread of bureaucracy into all realms of life. We will come back to this particular topic of bureaucracy because Weber is maybe the most important theorization on bureaucracy is provided by Weber. Weber has a full set of theories or very profound set of arguments about bureaucracy from the government to the workers movement, to the capitalist enterprises and the analysis of bureaucracy became a major theme in his work.

We will see that in the coming classes, for Weber bureaucracy reflects some of the very fundamental dynamics of the modern time or fundamental values of the modern time. Weber understands bureaucracy as a system of getting things done as a mechanism of organization in which rationality is at its best.

So, Weber understands bureaucracy as a system in which rationality takes the most concrete kind of form.

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- Karl Marx and Weber: 'Dialogue with the ghost of Marx'
- Like Kant, Weber is interested in questions of morality and science. He accepts the Kantian division between the human world of values and the natural and social world of facts.
- Weber argues that reason is limited in its understanding, and that the social scientist's subjective world invariably structured what she studied. These ideas inform Weber's ideal-type social science methodology.
- Weber was interested in Nietzsche's claim that modern peoples have experienced the death of God; this theme frames much of his sociology.



Also importantly, Weber had a lifelong debate with Marx and Weber did not agree with quite a lot of arguments made by Marx on capitalism, on religion, on alienation and a host of other issues.

This debate between Marx and Weber is something very important which we will discuss again as and when we proceed, about the nature of social stratification which is an important debate between Marx and Weber. Though Weber would not have put it as direct debate with

Marx, but these ideas, this difference of opinion in their ideas or their conflicting approach towards some of these fundamental domains were very important because Weber looked at the capitalism with far more sympathy and he was not somebody like Marx as he was not ready to dismiss capitalism as out rightly negative.

Similarly, Weber did not agree with the Marxian arguments that class is the only form of social stratification, or dividing society into different strata. He has a far more nuanced argument. So, this dialogue with the ghost of Marx is a term that is quite often used to explain Weberin engagement with the writings of Marx, because Marx had died by then. And then it was not a kind of direct engagement or dialogue with Marx.

Again, like Kant, Weber is interested in the question of morality and science. He accepts the Kantian division between the human world of values and the natural and social world of facts. So, Immanuel Kant was somebody who very significantly influenced Max Weber and he agreed with the Kantian ideas about values, about morality and he accepted the Kantian division between human world of values and the natural and social world of facts.

So, here it becomes important for you because till the time of Weber sociology was modeled after a natural science as we discussed in several of the previous classes. Durkheim wanted to craft a sociology which is modeled after that of any social science. Auguste Comte wanted to call it as social physics.

But here Weber took a different turn and then he argued that the human world is completely or heavily influenced by values and values cannot be treated as natural fact or social fact and you cannot reduce human life or human world into that of the natural or social world.

Weber argues that reason is limited in its understanding and that the social scientist's subjective world invariably structured what she studied. These ideas inform Weber's ideal type social science methodology. Weber was extremely concerned about the fact that a human being can never be, a social scientist can never be completely free of or can never transcend completely the kind of value orientations in which he or she is brought up and to declare that somebody's research is completely objective is would be too much of a claim as per Weber.

Weber argues that the reason is limited in its understanding and that the social scientist's subjective world invariably structured what she studied. These ideas inform Weber's ideal

type social science methodology. Weber was interested in Nietzsche's claim that modern people have experienced the death of God; this theme frames much of his sociology. This is again a very controversial, very influential argument that need Nietzsche's declared that God is dead.

The old world in which the theology was at the center stage and theological arguments about the omnipresent, omnipotent God controlling individual lives of human beings and Nietzsche declared that God is dead. Now it is an individual sub emerged and we saw that in the case of the Durkheim as well. Durkheim declared that individualism is the new God. Individuals have emerged who are kind of unconnected with the society. This Nietzscheian argument evolved the decline of religion, the death of God is a very prominent theme that you will find in Weberian thesis as well.

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- Weber's ideas about rationalization owe much to Nietzsche's notion that modernity has "de-deified" nature, making the idea of God unbelievable in the scientific world.



- But he also realized the lingering influences of old patterns of morality



Weber's ideas about rationalization owe much to Nietzsche's notion that modernity has "de-deified" nature, making the idea of God unbelievable in the scientific world. This is again something that you are familiar with. Weber's ideas about rationalization owe much to Nietzsche's notion that Modernity has "de-deified" nature. Modernity has taken away all the spiritual aspects or theological aspects of the nature.

Modernity has taught you that, you do not really depend upon the religion to understand how this world has come to being. You do not need to look into the theological explanation to understand how did human life evolved? Or how did this particular universe evolved? Or how did you know Earth as a planet evolved? So, it became very clear that modernity through

its discourse of science and rationality provided an alternative explanatory framework to understandable things. So, that in a way “de-deified” the nature. Nature is now kind of opened bear, nature was demystified. It was be demystified it was argued that there is nothing divine about it. It is not the God has created this nature with some extra human powers, nature was seen as a natural process because of some scientific reasons which “de-deified” the nature, making the idea of God unbelievable in the scientific world.

Because we know that now no serious scientists would believe that this world is created by God or human beings are created by God or no scientist would believe in the theory of creation. Though you have some exceptions people might still be scientists themselves, might be still thinking about the theory of creation, but that is a complicated matter how some of the scientists are able to have this kind of this cognitive dissonance which is the term that are quite often used. They have this ability to keep this cognitive dissonance even while there is something with which strikes you on the face with all evidences, you want to, you do not want to believe that rather you want to believe in what you have been believing and they seems to be quite comfortable in that kind of a life. It is a complicated story that I am not going into that.

But he also realized the lingering influence of old patterns of morality and this is something extremely important. So, what is it's the significance? Does modernity mean that people have said, goodbye to everything of their tradition and they have completely become modern. No, that is not happened even in the European societies where we see as the birthplace of modernity.

So, tradition still exist, especially some of the traditional patterns of morality still exist. Certain traditional practices exists, certain ethical practices and ethical ideas remain. It is extremely important to recognize that as well. Modernity is not a completed project, even in the Europe, modernity is not a completed fulfilled finished product. It is always seen as a project in the making, project in progress, not as a completed kind of a project.

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Intellectual influence of Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert



- Dilthey argued that human behavior and nature could be studied scientifically, but they studied different subjects and produced different kinds of knowledge.
- The natural sciences are oriented toward the explanation of physical or natural events, whereas the social sciences are oriented toward the explanation of human action. Hence, researchers in each field obtain quite divergent forms of data.
- Dilthey was correct in noting that the social sciences could obtain a quite different form of knowledge than the natural sciences. Social scientific statements are different from and, Weber added, must be kept separate from value judgments of any sort. The key to social scientific knowledge is to *verstehen* the subjective meanings that people attach to their actions.



Another set of intellectual influences on Weber are from Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert. Dilthey argued that human behavior and nature could be studied scientifically but they studied different subjects and produced different kinds of knowledge. This is something extremely important, the whole question is that can human society be studied scientifically.

If not scientifically what else, what other paradigm can be used to study human society and Dilthey argued that they can be studied scientifically. The human behavior and the nature could be studied scientifically, but what does the scientific approach means or it differs when you study Human Society on one hand and the nature on the other hand where they study different subjects and produce different kinds of knowledge.

The knowledge that was produced, scientific knowledge that is produced about the nature is very different from the scientific knowledge that is produced about human society because the epistemological base and the methodological orientations of science as used to study the nature is not something that you can simply adopt to study human Society.

So, the epistemological as well as methodological orientations of science must be different. The Natural Sciences are oriented towards the explanation of physical or natural events whereas social sciences are oriented towards the explanation of Human Action. This is an extremely important Point. What do a physicist tell you, or what do astronomers tell you, what do the natural scientists tried to explain?

They tried to explain the kind of natural events whether it is a big bang or whether it is Higgs-boson particles or whether it is some supernova or some kind of a micro reaction

that is taking place or is it about nanotechnology, they are all trying to explain physical or natural events or processes when you will be able to observe certain things either directly or indirectly and you will have statistical models.

You will have theories and you try to collect the data and to prove your argument whereas social sciences are oriented towards the explanation of human action. Hence, researchers in each field obtain quite divergent forms of data. In the case of studying a society what we are trying to do is to explain why human beings behave in a particular manner.

We are trying to explain human action and this is very different even more complicated from the natural event that you are trying to explain. For example, a particular festival taking place or the voting behavior of a particular caste people or a particular communal violence or a religious violence taking place in certain areas. It is very difficult to explain the kind of human action. Because as we will elaborate human beings simply do not behave, they are not of course there is, the genetics plays a very important role but equally important is this whole argument of culture, how we try to deal with our biological instincts and how the culturally we are trying to fashion and how culturally we try to deal with our biological instincts and then try to appear more civilized.

Dilthey was correct in noting that the social science could obtain a quite different form of knowledge than the natural sciences. So, Dilthey very forcefully argued that the scientific knowledge that you derive from social sciences must be different from that of the natural sciences. Social scientific statements are different from science and Weber added must be kept separate from value judgment of any sort.

So, value judgment of the researcher, as a researcher is born and brought up in a particular family atmosphere, in a particular culture and as a social scientist you go and study somebody else culture or you study your own culture. And then you try to understand why certain people behave in certain manner, and there is every possibility that your value orientations influence when you trying to understanding other, we tend to judge them, we tend to speak in either in approving tone or disapproving tone. We carry our own value judgment on our back and it is very difficult to completely take it out and then appear as if a person you are completely uninfluenced by any of this ideological baggage's. The key to social scientific knowledge is to Verstehen, the subjective meaning that people attached to their actions.

We will come back to this term, Verstehen again. It is an extremely important point as it talks about a kind of an objective understanding of the subjective meaning. If you try to objectively understand why people behave in certain manner that is how and what kind of subjective meanings that people attached to their action and you try to understand those subjective meanings in an objective manner.

I hope you follow, because if I do certain thing I am acting as a subjective manner, I do certain things in a particular manner because I like the way of doing it or I have my personal preferences. I have my reasons for doing that. This is what is understood as the subjective way of doing my action. And for a sociologist who is observing me, his duty is to objectively study my intentions, my values and why am I doing this.

He has no business to reinterpret or to pass opinion about why, what I am doing, why I am doing, what kind of ideas that I have. He has no business to comment on that. He is supposed to objectively study this subjective meanings that the actors attached to their actions.

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Verstehen: Objective study of subjective values of actors



Influence of Heinrich Rickert

• Firstly, Weber accepted Rickert's argument that reality is infinite and human beings can only know about reality through the selection of concepts to denote key properties of the social world. Second, why a scholar chooses one topic over another is less important than assuring for study that the research process is objective. Third, it is necessary in the social sciences to develop a set of concepts that captures the distinctiveness of historical processes.

• Studying values in an objective manner



Verstehen is the objective study of subjective values of actors. Because unlike natural sciences, these values are extremely important and you need to study these values of actors because behind every action there are certain kinds of values and Weber will elaborate in the subsequent discussions and we will deal it with them, we will discuss them very elaborately. Then he was also influenced by Heinrich Rickert. Firstly, Weber accepted Rickert's argument that reality is infinite and human beings can only know about reality through the selection of concepts to denote key properties of social World.

Secondly, why a scholar chooses one topic over another is less important than assuring for the study that the research process is objective. Third, it is necessary in the social sciences to develop a set of concepts that capture the distinctiveness of historical processes. So, this is something extremely important. It is something like a, something like a providing a kind of proper framework to understand or to undertake the social science.

So, Weber accepted Rickert's argument that reality is infinite and human beings can only know about reality through the selection of concepts to denote key properties of the social world. Now, what is social reality has been one of the most profound questions. What is the reality? In Indian philosophical tradition there is huge discussion about it. What is the reality?

Is it Maya? Is it real? Is it an illusion? Or is it only, does it only exist among our minds or is there a reality beyond what we see all these things? This whole debate about what is reality is a philosophically very profound question. Can you believe your eyes? Is what your eyes see? Is it the true picture of reality? Can you believe your ears? What you hear? Is it the true picture of reality?

So, what do you perceive through your senses, what you perceive through your five senses are they really represent the true nature of reality and we know that in through scientific experiments and other things that are host of particles, processes, dynamics which are not amenable to our senses. You cannot see them, you cannot see lot of things. You cannot see Electron, Proton Neutron. You cannot see a host of things.

Science knows that your sensory perceptions have limitations and if you move from the sensory perceptions into the kind of categories the concepts, the conceptual tools that you use to capture a particular phenomenon again, they are very limited. They are very limited because you have to have a concept, a concept is something which tries to help you to define a particular phenomenon.

You have this concept and with the help of this particular concept you try to capture a particular social phenomenon. Again this concept is your own construct, the concept is your own creation. And with this your own creation, you try to capture a reality. So, it is infinite and human beings can only know about reality through the selection of concepts to denote key properties of the social world.

Even social sciences, look at the case of social sciences. We have discipline for economics, political science, sociology, psychology and it gives you an impression that like human beings live in this kind of compartments, do we live like this, do we have a very specific economic side? Do we have a very specific social and political and psychological life?

No, these terms, terminologies and these disciplines were invented by human beings to emphasize, to give projection to certain discernible areas, certain desirable properties for human lives. Otherwise, nobody leaves as per this watertight compartments. These are the concepts that we created and these concepts play a very important role in providing a specific kind understanding to ourselves.

Second, why a scholar chooses one topic over another is less important than assuring for the study that the research process is objective. He again emphasizes the arguments that your approach must be objective. You must ensure that you adopt an objective mechanism to evaluate that.

For example, whether a man can study, topics related to women's issues or an upper caste person can study social issues related to lower caste or a white man can study issues associated with the black people. Now, the answer is definitely yes, but after that, after providing this emphatic, yes, then there is quite a lot of other questions about whether you are being open-minded, you being sensitive, you being quite be aware of your own position of privileges. You try to understand how knowledge and power relations work. A host of points that have to make you really introspect what you are, what one is doing. And third, it is necessary in the social sciences to develop a set of concepts that capture the distinctiveness of historical process. Rickert was extremely particular, he was highly particular about the whole significance of historical process.

Because the history in a very unique way has fashioned the contemporary societies. Why different societies are so different is not only that they are different now, they are also the product of very distinct different unique historical processes. So, this unique historical processes produce different kind of unique social situations and one must pay key attention to these historical processes.

That is why I repeatedly tell the class or tell you that you cannot really distinguish between sociology and history without understanding history your understanding of sociology

becomes extremely limited or partial. So, the fundamental contribution of Weber is his argument about the studying values in an objective manner.

You must objectively study the realm of values and scholars like Durkheim or Auguste Comte and others they did not pay as much as attention to this whole process of values rather, they believed that the outward behavior or things that can be observed, things that can be counted can be collected, studied and then analyzed by scientist, by social scientist akin to or similar to what the physicist or chemistry, a scientist or other science do with respect to Natural Sciences.

So, this is the first session about the intellectual background as well as even the personal life of Max Weber. Let us end the class and we will meet for the next class. Thank you.