



Block 3

Max Weber

UNIT 7 PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MAX WEBER'S WORK*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- describe biographical details of Max Weber;
- outline main ideas and perspectives that influenced his writings; and
- explain central ideas in his writings.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

We will begin this unit with a brief biographical sketch of Weber's life and times. This will enable you to identify the intellectual ideas and perspectives that influenced his thought. In this Unit, we will discuss how Weber conceptualised Sociology as a mode of inquiry distinct from the natural sciences, with a distinctive subject matter concerning the meanings attributed by social actors to their actions in a specific historical context.

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7.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MAX WEBER

Max Weber was born on 21st April 1864 in Erfurt town of Thuringa, Germany, in a prosperous Protestant household. His father was a politician, and very much a part of the political establishment of the day, leading a luxurious lifestyle. His mother, Helene, was a deeply religious person whose values were opposed to those of her husband. Weber's parents had a strained marital relationship. This difficult relationship deteriorated over the years and had its impact upon their children, including young Max, whose divided loyalties to his parents later led to much psychological distress. Let us refer to Box 7.1 in order to look at early socialization and schooling of Weber.

Box 7.1 Early Socialization and Schooling of Weber

“Weber was a weak child, who suffered from meningitis at the age of four. He preferred books to sports. In early adolescence he read extensively and developed intellectual interests of his own. He was brought up in an intellectually stimulating atmosphere. At an early age he met celebrated historians like Trietschke, Sybel, Dilthey and many others. He also studied Goethe, Spinoza and Kant. He received an excellent secondary education in languages, history and classics. However, Weber was shy and withdrawn by nature in his school days. School teachers frequently complained about Weber's indiscipline and his lack of respect for authority.

In 1882, Max Weber went to the University of Heidelberg at the age of eighteen. Here the shy and withdrawn Max Weber suddenly became active and began to mix socially. In the university he became popular among the students. However, he did not complete his education and after three terms he left for military service in Strasbourg.

After two years of military service Weber returned to his parents in 1884. He joined the University of Berlin to complete his education. He also studied in the University of Goettingen.” (Biographical Sketch: Max Weber (1864-1920), Block 4, ESO 13:4)

A brilliant student, Weber studied at the University of Heidelberg and thereafter, read economic and legal history at the University of Berlin where he later taught jurisprudence. His PhD thesis was on the History of Commercial Societies in the Middle Ages, and his post-doctoral study was on Roman Agrarian History. He married Marianne Schnitger who was a distant cousin. He attained the position of a Professor in the German University system when he was only in his early thirties. He demonstrated his academic brilliance and scholarship in various lectures and addresses; most famous was his 1895 public lecture on the National state and Economic Policy which is popularly known as ‘the Freiburg address’.

Even as his academic achievements took him to great heights, his personal life underwent a deep crisis due to his conflict with his father, whose sudden death after an argument with his son, upset Max Weber deeply. In fact, he held himself responsible for his father's demise and suffered from feelings of intense guilt as a result. For several years, Weber suffered from mental breakdowns which eventually lead to him resigning from his professorship at the University of Heidelberg. It was only in 1903 that he was able to resume his scholarly work again, but he did not return to teaching for several years. His awful personal ordeal however did not prevent him from producing some of the greatest scholarly work that is remembered and admired even today. The themes he tackled included the interrelationship between religious ideas and economic and social change; the growth of 'rationality' as the defining feature of modernity; power and authority and the control of the modern state over the individual.

In 1904 Weber published his important essays pertaining to social and economic issues, the question of objectivity in social sciences and the first section of his famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which was published in 1905. He visited America the same year, and this visit deeply influenced his interest in the various issues of a capitalist economy and political organisation. Many of his important theoretical formulations on these issues are rooted in his visit to America. Weber's academic output increased greatly in the later years. Some of his path breaking contributions included his studies on the religions of China, Confucianism and Taoism (published in 1915); and the religions of India, Hinduism and Buddhism, and ancient Judaism published in 1916-17. In 1919, Weber delivered an important lecture *Science as a Vocation and Politics as a Vocation* in the University of Berlin, which articulated his political and intellectual positions in a time of great political upheaval in Germany. He also worked extensively on his work *Economy and Society* which he was unable to complete and which was published posthumously. According to Poggi (2006:16), his major contributions can be classified under the following categories:

- Writings on economic history;
- Writings based upon his empirical studies on rural workers, industrial work conditions and the German stock market
- Writings on the 'cultural sciences' and their methodology
- Writings on the sociology of religion, including Calvinism (a Protestant Christian sect), Confucianism and Taoism (ancient Chinese religions), Hinduism and Buddhism and ancient Judaism.
- Writings on general sociology particularly the relationship between economic, religious, juridical and political systems.

He died in 1920 at the relatively young age of 56, after a fever which was later diagnosed as pneumonia.

7.3 SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Weber was also a public intellectual who passionately engaged with and participated in the political sphere. A nationalist, he volunteered for military service when the First World War broke out, even though he was fifty. He was however, deeply critical of the German leadership and war policies and advocated an overhaul of the political system, which made him very unpopular with the ruling dispensation. After Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War in 1918, Weber argued for sobriety in politics and assisted in the drafting of a new constitution and the founding of the German Democratic Party. He was known to take the side of social and political causes that were not popular or mainstream, and thus he was viewed with suspicion by the political elites of the day. Let us refer to Box 7.2 in order to find out Weber's political interests.

Box 7.2 Political Interests of Weber

“Weber was appointed a Professor of Economics at the University of Freiburg. Here he demonstrated his superb scholarship in various lectures and addresses. His address of 1895 on The National State and Economic Policy attracted the attention of various scholars. In 1896, Weber was appointed a Professor of Economics in Heidelberg. Gradually he emerged a central figure among the intellectuals there.

Weber started taking interest in politics and was active in Christian Social Political Circle. He published numerous papers pertaining to the socio-political situation of Germany of the period.[....]

Weber was a nationalist. When the World War 1 began he was fifty. However, he volunteered for military service ignoring his health condition. Though Weber was a nationalist, he was dissatisfied with the War policy of German leaders. He attacked the conduct of the war and the ineptitude of Germany's leadership. However, the leadership in power never accepted his advice and ideas. Rather, the government thought of prosecuting Weber for his advocacy of total change in the political structure of Germany, responsible parliamentary government and limited power to the Kaiser and the chancellor. However, in spite of all threats and challenges Weber kept on advocating for a liberal political system in Germany.

In the period between 1918 and 1920 Weber entered active political arena. He became a founding member of Deuxche Demokratische Partei, an advisor to the German delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, and a participant in the preliminary work of writing a new German constitution. In this period he also addressed several student and academic groups to explain the national-democratic goal of German political system. However, the political ideas and actions of Max Weber faced severe resistance from the German leadership in power on the one hand, and from the leftists on the other.”(Biographical Sketch: max Weber (1864-1920), Block 4, ESO 13:5 and 6)

Weber engaged with almost all the contemporary issues and debates of his times and his work captures the great shifts taking place in the society and history of the period. As we have already mentioned above, Weber's work poses a very interesting contrast to that of Karl Marx, whose materialist conception of history was marked by economic determinism. Weber in contrast theorised the fundamental role of values and belief systems in shaping the contours of material existence and provided a corrective to the Marxian model. We shall now discuss some of the key ideas that were to lay the philosophical foundations of his work.

7.4 INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Weber's work can be appropriately understood in light of the intellectual context from which it emerged. Let us now look at the intellectual ideas that influenced Weber.

7.4.1 Debate between Natural and Social Sciences and the Subject Matter of Sociology

The philosophical climate of Germany in the latter part of the 19th century probably had the most outstanding system of higher education in the world, and the highest standards of research in both, the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, physiology) as well as other disciplines like philosophy, law, theology and history. The natural sciences, or *Naturwissenschaften* were juxtaposed with those disciplines that were concerned with human culture and human behaviour, i.e. the *Geisteswissenschaften* or *Kulturwissenschaften* or sciences of human history and culture. As you have read in earlier Units in this course, the Natural Sciences aimed at making accurate predictions and generalisations based upon empirical observations, and are thus considered 'exact' sciences. The positivist world view, particularly in England and France, also held that the study of social or cultural phenomena should be guided by the principles of the Natural Sciences. However, many scholars in Germany rejected this view and stressed upon the contextual and historically specific nature of social phenomena, and the ways in which they differ across time, space and historical circumstances. For instance, in studying economic phenomena, British or Austrian scholars would work with the notion of the rational 'economic man' using deductive reasoning to show how such an actor would attempt to maximise utility, regardless of the specific historical situation or the morals and values in force in society. German scholars of the 'historical school' of economics, on the other hand, attempted to build up a science of economic phenomena inductively, by piecing together the available data, studying the various social, political and other circumstances that influenced human behaviour and the various meanings that actors gave to their activities in a particular place at a particular time (Poggi, 2006).

These two styles of understanding resulted in a lively and ongoing discussion and debate amongst German scholars about the appropriate method for studying social and cultural phenomena, and in particular, the importance of the specific values and preferences of the person studying these phenomena. Weber played an

important role in these debates. He rejected the positivist notion that the cognitive aims of the natural and social sciences were basically the same; he also challenged the German historicist view that stated that it was impossible to accurately predict or generalise about the nature of human activity as human behaviour was not governed by the same kinds of laws as the natural world. He argued that the scientific method always takes recourse to abstraction and generalisation. At the same time, to understand human beings and their actions, it was necessary to also understand their motivations, which were not observable like outward or overt behaviour. Weber played a major role in proposing a methodology that would enable the social scientist to understand the constructed nature of social reality from the perspective of the social actor or individuals living in society as well as the larger or macro processes at the societal level. In particular, his ideas about the role of value judgments in conducting sociological research was an important methodological and philosophical contribution.

As we have seen above, Weber was concerned with the debate concerning science and history, and attempted to establish a foundation for sociology which took into account both individuality and generality. The German idealist tradition, whose major proponent was the philosopher Immanuel Kant, made a clear cut distinction between the biological or physical dimension of human existence and the spiritual or idealistic dimension. These influences can be seen in Weber's approach to methodology, understanding and social action. As thinking beings are free subjects, who can freely participate in the domain of ideas and exercise their choice and agency. Thus the methods appropriate for studying the physical and natural world, and the application of laws of nature were inappropriate to the study of human society. Thus to understand human beings and their culture and history, an empathetic understanding of the reasons behind human actions and an understanding of the overall cultural patterns was essential.

The ideas of the German philosophers Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Dilthey greatly influenced Weber. Windelband posited that the aims and objectives of natural and cultural sciences were different. While the former aimed at generating universal laws, i.e. were 'nomothetic' in scope; the latter aimed at more particularistic understanding of unique phenomena, i.e. they were 'idiographic'. Dilthey believed that to properly undertake a study of human society and culture, it was not enough to study it from the outside, like a physical or natural phenomenon, but rather, from the inside, through experience and subjective understanding. In other words, the social scientist must try and put himself/herself in the shoes of the subject of the study and attempt to understand or re-live their experiences and thus understand them empathetically. Weber's notion of *Verstehen* or 'empathetic understanding' was deeply influenced by Dilthey's formulations. However, he conceived of empathetic understanding as only the first step in sociological analysis of a phenomenon, to be followed by a causal explanation that was closer to the positivist and empirical tradition of the natural sciences. You will learn more about what Weber meant by *verstehen* in Unit 12.

7.4.2 Causality and Probability

There is sometimes a misunderstanding that Weber, in tune with the German idealistic tradition, rejected the notion of causality, however, this is inaccurate as Weber firmly believed in both historical and sociological causality. However, due to the extreme difficulty in making straightforward causal links in something as complex as the social world, Weber uses the concept of 'probability' instead. Probability implies that in a given social situation, human beings are likely to respond in a particular manner which is governed by the norms of society. However, this cannot be guaranteed with complete certainty for all actors, because there may be certain unique circumstances that may result in them behaving or acting differently. Weber distinguishes between historical causality and sociological probability. Historical causality refers to the unique causes that give rise to a particular event; while sociological probability refers to the connection or interrelationships between two phenomena. Establishing causality requires that we perform 'mental experiments'. For instance, we may say that the use of animal fat in the cartridges supplied in the British army resulted in the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. We have to then ask ourselves if the revolt would have taken place without the issue of the cartridges. If we reach the conclusion that the 1857 revolt would have taken place regardless of this incident, because the level of dissatisfaction and feeling of oppression amongst those who revolted was so intense, then we can rule it out as a causal factor. With regard to sociological causality, Weber uses probabilistic frameworks. For instance, in his famous thesis on the emergence of capitalism, Weber proposed that a certain type of personality was required, that was shaped by the Protestant teachings. The proposition is proved when through mental experiments or by comparative study in different cultures, the sociologist is able to show that capitalism could probably not have developed without such personalities. Thus, the Protestant ethic may be viewed as one of the causes, rather than the sole and only cause, for the development of capitalism. We can see that Weber attempted to reconcile the subjective and interpretative understanding of social and historical phenomena with a rigorous scientific method based upon causal analysis. In fact, on the very first page of his work *Economy and Society* Weber defines Sociology as 'a science which aims to understand clearly social behaviour and thus give a causal explanation of its course and results' (Bogardus, 1960: 477). While sociology must be concerned with empirical analysis of society and history, the method of sociology would have to be different from that of the natural sciences. Sociological analysis would have to examine social action within a context of social interaction, and would have to be interpretive, not viewing people as objects just driven by impersonal forces outside their purview.

In order to understand social behaviour or human actions, it is imperative that the social scientist engages with the values and beliefs that underlie the behaviour of human beings in society. At the same time, the researcher herself/himself brings on board their own personal beliefs, orientations and values, that may affect the way in which they themselves interpret and understand reality. Weber does not see this as a disadvantage. In fact, research in the social sciences can not only see the unfolding of events from the outside, but also contribute a deeper

understanding of the motives, values and orientations that influence these events. Poggi (2006) gives the example of a person chopping logs of wood. A researcher may describe the external actions of a person chopping wood as an objective, external activity. But by looking at the underlying motivations for this activity, the researcher may consider the need for preparing fuel for the winter, or the need to keep oneself fit through this physical activity or even take out one's anger on one's neighbour by chopping wood instead. Thus, we see that Weber played a major role in developing an 'hermeneutic' tradition in social science, which emphasised the role of individual subjectivity as the starting point of social relationships and processes.

7.4.3 Objectivity and Values in Social Sciences

Weber was clear that there was no such thing as an 'objective' science of society, unlike the earlier founders of Sociology. As we have discussed earlier, one of Weber's major concerns was the relation between science and human action. While emphasising the importance of values in understanding social behaviour, he was also equally clear that the personal evaluations of the sociologist must be separate from the analysis of the society and processes under study. He distinguished between 'value relevance' and 'value neutrality'. In other words, even if a researcher selects a particular problem for investigation because of his/her interest or value orientations, the process of inquiry and the study of the phenomenon at hand must be strictly in accordance with the value-neutral principles of science. In other words, the researcher cannot twist or manipulate the findings to suit his or her own ideology or value system. Value neutrality highlights the gap between 'facts' and 'values'; Weber held that an empirical science can never advise a person what s/he should do; however, it can clarify for that persons what s/he can or wants to do (see Coser 1977: 221-222). According to Weber, the role of the scientist was not to engage in moral debates or to act like prophets or sages, but rather, to throw light upon facts and their interrelationships. Let us refer to Box 7.3 to understand the place of values in social sciences.

Box 7.3 Values in Social Sciences

“Science is often described as an ‘objective’ search for truth. It is supposed to be value-free, unbiased, impartial. You have seen how Durkheim advocates objective understanding of social facts and how he recommends that the sociologist free himself/herself from prejudice and pre-conceived notions. Is an ‘objective’, ‘value-free’ science, natural or social, really possible? According Weber, values play an important role in choosing a particular topic of study. Why have you chosen sociology as a course? Certain values have guided you. You might have thought it interesting, or easy, or may be you did not like the other elective courses. Similarly, if a scientist decides to study, say, the behaviour of an atom or the life and customs of rural Indians, he/she has been guided by certain value orientations.

But Weber makes a clear distinction between value-orientations and value judgments. The researcher or scientist may be guided to undertake a particular study because of certain value-orientations, but, according to Weber, he/she must not pass moral judgments about it. The researcher must observe ethical neutrality. His/her job is to study phenomena, not pass judgments about whether they are 'good' or 'evil'.[....]

Weber assigns to the sociologist the task of interpretative understanding of the motives of human actors. The humanness of the sociologist can prove an asset in understanding society and culture because the sociologist can examine phenomena from the inside. He/she can attempt causal explanations by using ideal types and historical comparison. But ethical neutrality must be maintained.” (ESO 13, Block 5: 17)

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) State whether the following statements are True or False.
 - a. Max Weber strongly believed that the cognitive aims of the natural and social sciences were basically the same. (T/F)
 - b. Weber's thinking emphasised the role of individual subjectivity as the starting point of social relationships and processes. (T/F)
- 2) Explain the difference between 'value relevance' and 'value neutrality' as explained by Weber.

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7.5 CENTRAL IDEAS

Let us understand some of the important ideas in Weber's writings.

7.5.1 Ideal Types

Weber emphasised the need for the researcher to separate his/her 'value judgments' from 'judgements of fact', by rigorous examination of factual data and the development of clearly defined concepts which help us to understand the different configurations of a social phenomenon under specific circumstances. This led him to develop his formulation of the 'ideal type', about which you will study in detail in another Unit of this Course. Ideal type is a methodological tool in which a certain model or construct of the reality to be studied is formulated by the researcher, by abstracting the most prominent features of that phenomenon. It acts as a measuring rod to compare the similarities and differences between the

'real' and the 'ideal', and enables the researcher to construct hypotheses linking them with the conditions that led to a particular phenomenon or event becoming prominent, or the consequences resulting from the emergence of a particular phenomenon. For instance, if you wish to study the functioning of parliamentary democracy in a society, it will be advisable, following Weber, to construct an ideal type of parliamentary democracy, abstracting its most prominent features and constructing a model or an image of its most significant aspects. Then by comparing the empirical reality with this 'ideal type', you will be able to gain an insight into the historical reasons for its emergence as well as a better understanding of how it actually operates in a specific socio-historical context. We will learn more about ideal types in the next Unit.

7.5.2 Social Action

Max Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of social action. This is a crucial factor in understanding the philosophical foundations of his work. In this sense, he diverged from thinkers like Marx and Durkheim who, as you have read, placed greater emphasis on social structure rather than individual action in shaping human behaviour. Weber's sociological work was geared towards understanding "the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their mutual orientations within specific social-historical contexts" (Coser, 1977: 217). In comparison with Durkheim and Marx, Weber also emphasised the roles of values and culture in orienting human behaviour. While Durkheim focused on the society and 'social facts' which had both exteriority and constraint, Weber also focused on the individuals and their actions; and while Marx argued that the material world was more important than the world of ideas, Weber argued that ideas were the motivating factors that shaped the actions of individuals.

Durkheim was concerned with institutional arrangements that maintained the cohesion of social structures, while Marx devoted attention to class struggles, and to changing social and economic structures. "In contrast, Weber's primary focus was on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their mutual orientations within specific social-historical contexts." (ibid, p 217). Weber identified four major kinds of social action-traditional, emotive/affective, value oriented rational action and goal-oriented rational action. While traditional action is based upon values and customs of the society; affective action upon the emotional state of mind of the individual at a particular time. Rational action entails pursuing certain goals using rational means. Value-oriented rational action involves the pursuit of certain values or goals that may not be 'rational', e.g., spiritual goals, through means that are designed to achieve the goal, e.g., prayer, meditation etc. Finally, Goal-oriented rational action, wherein goals and means are rationally chosen (e.g., an engineer building a structure using the most efficient means available), is regarded as the defining feature of modern Western society, about which Weber wrote and theorised extensively. Weber held that it was this distinguishing way of acting in all the realms of social life that made modern Western societies qualitatively different from non-Western ones.

You have read in the Blocks 1 and 2 on how Marx and Durkheim attempted to account for major historical or evolutionary changes in society by referring to structural change; e.g., mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, as explained by Durkheim. Weber, however, brought into his analysis the dimension of human action, and considered the concrete, acting individual as the unit of analysis for understanding human history and society. His interpretative Sociology considers the individual and his/her action to be the basic unit or atom, and the only carrier of meaningful conduct.

Weber used his typology of forms of social action to understand social change. Weber was deeply concerned with the problems of modern civilisation. He believed that the shift from traditional to rational action was crucial in the development of a rational economic system like capitalism, a theme which he explored in his famous text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which we referred to earlier. He also used it to understand power relationships in societies by developing a typology of authority; charismatic, traditional and rational-legal. Charismatic authority derives from the 'charisma' or special qualities of leaders and visionary figures; traditional authority, which is typical of pre-modern societies, derives from a belief in the importance of traditions; however, it is 'rational-legal authority' which predominates in modern societies, which have a modern system of government and a well-developed administrative bureaucracy.

7.5.3 Rationality

Many scholars have remarked upon the central themes of rationality and rationalisation as fundamental to understanding Weber's work. By rationality Weber referred to logical and coherent ideas and behaviour that govern human activity. Rationalisation is the process by which rationality applies to different aspects of life. Let us refer to Box 7.4 in order to understand in detail what is meant by rationality and rationalisation.

Box 7.4 Meaning of Rationality and Rationalisation

According to Weber, the contemporary world is characterised by rationality. Max Weber believed that the key to understand modern society is to be found in its rational features and rationalising forces. For him, the modern Western world is characterised by rationality. As a result of this, human activity is marked by methodical calculation. Quantification, predictability and regularity become important. Individuals rely more on logic, reason and calculation than on supernatural beliefs. To Weber rationalisation means that "principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious power existed" (Weber 1946: 139, cf. Hearn 1985: 76). Let us take an example. If a farmer wants to reap a good harvest, he can spend

time, energy and money on conducting *poojas* and prayers. On the other hand, he can utilise the same effort and expense in digging irrigation canals or a tube-well so that his crops may thrive. In the first case, he is dependent on “mysterious incalculable forces”; in the second case he is using rational calculation.

To Weber rationalisation is the product of scientific specialisation and technological differentiation of western culture. He describes rationalisation as striving for perfection, as an ingenious refinement of the conduct of life and the attainment of mastery over the external world (see Freund 1972: 18). Demystification of beliefs and secularisation of thought are important facets of rationalisation which assist in attaining mastery over the world. Rationalisation also involves formalisation of laws and organisations. (ESO 13, Block 4: 50)

According to Weber, the growth and spread of rational action and rationalisation of all aspects of life under modernity resulted in ‘disenchantment’ of the world. Human life becomes so predictable and regulated that it loses its charm. Coser (1977: 233) writes: “The world of modernity, Weber stressed over and over again, has been deserted by the gods. Man has chased them away and has rationalized and made calculable and predictable what in an earlier age had seemed governed by chance, but also by feeling, passion and commitment, by personal appeal and personal fealty, by grace and by the ethics of charismatic heroes.” Weber attempted to illustrate this through his studies of various social institutions. His studies in the sociology of religion document the rationalisation of religious life. He also studied the process of rationalisation in the sphere of law, political authority, and even in the world of music -Western classical music is marked by strict rules and standardised procedures of performance, unlike the more spontaneous systems of music in Asia and Africa.

As we have seen earlier, Weber’s vision of the future was that of a world so highly regulated and rationalised, that we would become prisoners of our own device, trapped in an “iron cage” of our own making. Weber’s analysis of the effects of the iron cage of bureaucracy on individuals and society draws attention to the way the bureaucratic rationality of modern Western societies exerts such control that it delimits human freedom and possibilities. The rational, organising principles of modern bureaucracy include a system of hierarchical roles, a high degree of specialisation and compartmentalisation of knowledge, ‘merit -based’ employment based upon rules and regulations, and a rational-legal authority structure. This rational, bureaucratic system, common to most modern states, develops a life and legitimacy of its own and cannot be questioned by the people who it is supposed to serve. Thus it becomes constraining and limiting rather than empowering and enabling, crushing individual autonomy and freedom. This pessimistic vision of the future of humankind would be interesting for the learners of the present times to discuss and debate, particularly in the light of their own experiences of living in a modern state.

7.5.4 Religion and Economy

At the outset, it seems difficult to see a connection between religion and economy. Many of us would think that religious beliefs and values have nothing to do with economic activities. Well, Weber held a different view. Let us refer to Box 7.4 in order to understand Weber's perspective on religion and economy.

Box 7.5 Weber's Perspective on Religion and Economy

“According to him, it was the ideas, beliefs, values and world-view of human societies that guided the way their members acted, even in the economic sphere. As has already been mentioned, religion prescribes certain guidelines of behaviour. It is in accordance with these guidelines that followers direct or orient their activities. These guidelines are incorporated in the body of religious ethics of each religious system. [...]

The term “ethic” is not restricted to religion alone. You can speak of business ethics, political ethics and so on. Ethics is related to social structure because it affects in some way the social behaviour of individuals in society. Ethics is important because it sets certain standards of thought and behaviour, which are used to evaluate or judge actual behaviour. Ethical codes, in other words, represent what “ought” to be done. They reflect the particular values and beliefs of the social groups of which they are part.

According to Max Weber, there were certain affinities between the Protestant religious ethics and the economic system known as capitalism. These affinities, said Weber, helped capitalism to grow in the western world.” (ESO 13, Block 4: 24).

While Marx provided a systematic model of capitalism and capitalist development, Weber provided a wider and broader analysis, drawing attention to those aspects and concepts that were not given emphasis by Marx. Weber examined the historical unfolding of capitalism by paying due attention to economic and political factors along with the role of cultural factors like values, ideas and religious beliefs. Unlike Marx who gave primacy to economic factors, Weber gave emphasis to cultural factors which shaped the way human beings thought about a particular activity (in this case economic activity) and thus influenced their actions. Weber's thesis on the development of capitalism, unlike Marx, did not just focus on the material dimensions and technological factors, but the realm of ideas that human beings held and how these ideas prompted them to act. After carefully studying the factors that lead to the growth of capitalism in the west, Weber proposed the hypothesis that it was the ‘Protestant ethic’ that broke the hold of traditional ways of thinking and acting, and propelled an entirely new way of working and accumulating wealth.

Let us understand what Protestant ethics refer to. At the root of Protestant ethics is the belief that the ultimate goal of human life is salvation. In order to achieve salvation it is necessary to practice rigorous self-control, and lead a frugal life. Expectedly, those who follow Protestant ethics are extremely hard working and have a strong sense of responsibility, self-disciplined, and forgo enjoyment of luxuries in life. In Europe many Protestant sects came up. Calvinism was one of them. Calvinism stressed that people should work hard and generate profit. It, however, forbid them to spend the profit that they earn on worldly pleasures and luxuries. The only option before them was to re-invest the profit money and generate more money. In this way, rational capitalism was promoted.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the types of social action identified by Weber? Which one of them is a feature of modern Western society?

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- 2) How was Weber’s understanding of the development of capitalism different from that of Karl Marx?

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7.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit introduced you to some of the major ideas of Max Weber, who is regarded along with Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx as one of the founding fathers of Sociology. We discussed the biographical and social factors that shaped his work and ideas, and highlighted his participation in the politics of the day as a public intellectual. We showed how he brought in the dimension of empathetic understanding of human motivations and highlighted the role of culture and values in shaping economic and political processes and systems, thereby providing a more rounded and holistic analysis of capitalist society and social change. We discussed his methodological approach which was rigorous and methodical and sought to establish historical and sociological causality and probability by careful examination of the facts and deep analysis of their interrelationships. We concluded by highlighting his emphasis on value neutrality in social science research.

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7.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) False b) True
- 2) 'Value relevance' refers to a researcher's own interests or orientations which influence the selection of a particular research problem. However, while studying the problem, the researcher must strictly maintain 'value neutrality' and not manipulate the findings of the study to suit his/her ideology or value system. Value neutrality highlights the gap between 'facts' and 'values'.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Weber identified four major kinds of social action-traditional, emotive/affective, value oriented rational action and goal -oriented rational action. Goal-oriented rational action, wherein goals and means are rationally chosen (e.g., an engineer building a structure using the most efficient means available), is regarded as the defining feature of modern Western society.
- 2) Karl Marx emphasised the role of economic factors in the development of capitalism. Weber's ideas on the development of capitalism, unlike Marx, did not just focus on the material dimensions and technological factors, but also on the realm of ideas that human beings held and how these ideas prompted them to act. Weber studied the development of capitalism by paying due attention to economic and political factors along with the role of cultural factors like values, ideas and religious beliefs.

UNIT 8 SOCIAL ACTION AND IDEAL TYPES*

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Social Action
 - 8.2.1 Role of Values and Beliefs
 - 8.2.2 Types of Social Action
- 8.3 Ideal Types: Meanings, Construction and Characteristics
 - 8.3.1 Meaning
 - 8.3.2 Construction
 - 8.3.3 Characteristics
- 8.4 Purpose and Use of Ideal Types
- 8.5 Ideal Types in Weber's Work
 - 8.5.1 Ideal Types of Historical Particulars
 - 8.5.2 Abstract Elements of Social Reality
 - 8.5.3 Reconstruction of a Particular Kind of Behaviour
- 8.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.7 References
- 8.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- outline Weber's concept of social action;
- discuss the meaning and characteristics of ideal types;
- describe the purpose and use of ideal types in social sciences; and
- narrate Max Weber's use of ideal type in his major works.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit deals with concepts of social action and ideal type as part of Max Weber's concern with methodology of social sciences. This unit gives a perspective and a background to analyse the major theoretical formulations of Max Weber.

In this unit first we clarify the general meaning of social action and ideal type. This is followed by discussion on the role of beliefs and values in influencing social action. Thereafter, we highlight types of social action outlined by Weber. Subsequently, we discuss the concept of ideal type and characteristics of ideal-

*Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Units 14 and 16 of *Sociological Thought* (ESO 13) with modifications by Nita Mathur

type as reflected in the writing of Max Weber. Here we also answer two questions as to how and why of social scientists' construction of ideal type in their researches. Weber used ideal type in three distinctive ways. We explain these three ways of use of ideal type in Weber's work in terms of (a) ideal types of historical particulars, (b) ideal types of abstract elements of social reality and (c) ideal types relating to the reconstruction of a particular kind of behaviour. We examine each of these kinds with suitable illustrations.

8.2 SOCIAL ACTION

According to Mitchell (1968: 2,) 'social action denotes social behaviour. This concept is used both by social psychologists and sociologists. Many social scientists regarded social action as the proper unit of, observation in the social sciences. Action is social when the actor behaves in such a manner that his action is intended to influence the action of one or more other persons. In sociology it was Max Weber who first explicitly used and emphasised social action as the basis for sociological theory'. (Mitchell 1968: 2).

8.2.1 Role of Values and Beliefs

According to Max Weber (1964: 128-129) "Sociology is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its cause and effects".

Here we can point out the following important elements of social action

- i) social action includes all human behaviour.
- ii) social action attaches a subjective meaning to it.
- iii) the acting individual or individuals take into account the behaviour of others.
- iv) social action is oriented in its course.

You may learn about Weber's theory of social action in Box 8.1.

Box 8.1 Weber's Theory of Social Action

'Weber wanted to develop social theory in a way that tried to examine social action from the point of view of social actor. Although Weber shares with Marx a desire to develop what we can call a theory of social action, that is, a coherent account of how and why social actors act as they do, aspects of Weber's explanation differ from that offered by Marx. Whereas Marx describes motivation as the expression of human-beingness through productive activity and the desire to survive and prosper, Weber argues that social action also provided social actors with opportunities to live out their values and beliefs. There is no question that social actors act in order to survive, but for many the quality of life also depends on some of the more esoteric and abstract aspects of human consciousness, qualities that are often expressed as values and beliefs. For example, if a group of social actors share a particular set of religious or spiritual beliefs, notwithstanding the fact that they still need to survive, such beliefs are

likely to shape the way in which they manage their survival. Even the concept of 'survival' might be modified to include ideas about spiritual well-being. A social theory that seeks to explain social action in that context has to include some account of needs and desires, which exist alongside basic economic ones.

Following this line of argument, and placing this in the context of his analysis of the relentless spread of instrumental rationality in the modern world, Weber's theory of social action centres around an analysis of the rationality of otherwise of different types of action. If individuals are indeed immersed in a rationalised and rationalising social world, then presumably this has an important impact on the way they act. The basic point of departure of Weber's theory of social action is that actions can be distinguished one from the other depending on which kind of rationality the actor is trying to express. Unsurprisingly he concludes that in modern society the variety of rationality that most often guides social action is instrumental rationality. Being modern or acting in a modern way means acting according to the modern principles of instrumental rationality' (Ransome 2011: 119)

8.2.2 Types of Social Action

Weber has talked about four types of social actions. These are classified according to their modes of orientation:

i) Zweckrational or rational action in relation to a goal

Rational action with reference to goals is classified in terms of the conditions or means for the successful attainment of actor's own rationally closed ends. An example of this is an engineer constructing a bridge. He uses certain materials in a certain manner to achieve a goal. This activity is directed towards obtaining that goal, namely, completing the construction.

ii) Wertrational or rational action with reference to a value

Rational action with reference to value is classified in terms of rational orientation to an absolute value, that is, action which is directed to overriding ideals of duty, honour or devotion to a cause. Here one may give the example of a soldier laying down his life for the country. His action is not directed towards attaining a specific material goal like wealth. It is for the sake of certain values like honour and patriotism.

iii) Traditional Action

Traditional action type is classified as one which is under the influence of long practice, customs and habits. This is an action, which is guided by customs and longstanding beliefs which become second nature or habit.

Greeting elders with folded hands, for example, is almost a second nature to many Indians.

iv) Affective Action

Affective action is classified in terms of affectual orientation, especially emotional, determined by the specific states of feeling of the actor. Affective action is classified in terms of affectual orientation especially emotional, determined by the specific states of feeling of the actor.

Since reality presents a mixture of the four pure types of action, for our analysis and understanding we separate them analytically into pure or ideal types. For instance, the use of rational ideal types can help in measuring irrational deviation and we can understand particular empirical action by interpreting as to which of the four types of action it most closely approximates.

In order to understand better the types of action, identified by Max Weber, it is a good idea now to complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

List two examples from your day-to-day life for each of the four types of action identified by Max Weber. Compare your note, if possible, with the notes of your co-learners at the Study Centre

8.3 IDEAL TYPES: MEANING, CONSTRUCTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

To Max Weber, the term ‘ideal type’ has a distinctive meaning and there are certain underlying principles pertaining to its construction. Here in this section we shall explain the general and Weberian meanings of the term ‘ideal type’, its construction and characteristics.

8.3.1 Meaning

Let us begin with the dictionary meaning of the terms ‘ideal’ and ‘type’. According to New Websters Dictionary (NWD 1985), ‘ideal’ is a ‘conception or a standard of something in its highest perfection’. It refers to a mental image or conception rather than a material object. It is a model. The Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary says: ‘Your ideal of something is the person or thing that seems to you to be the best example of it’.

The term ‘type’ means a kind, class or group as distinguished by a particular character (NWD 1985). Thus, generally speaking, we may conceptualise ideal type as a kind, category, class or group of objects, things or persons with particular character that seems to be the best example of it.

Weber used ideal type in a specific sense. To him, ideal type is a mental construct, like a model, for the scrutiny and systematic characterisation of a concrete situation. Indeed, he used ideal type as a methodological tool to understand and analyse social reality.

Methodology is the conceptual and logical research procedure by which knowledge is developed. Historically much of the methodological concern in the social sciences has been directed towards establishing their scientific credentials (Mitchell 1968: 118). Max Weber was particularly concerned with the problem of objectivity in social sciences. Hence he used ideal type as a methodological tool that looks at reality objectively. It scrutinises, classifies, systematises and defines social reality without subjective bias. The ideal type has nothing to do with values. Its function, as a research tool, is for classification and comparison. To quote Max Weber (1971:63):

“The ideal typical concept will develop our skill in imputation in research. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description”.

In other words, ideal types are concepts formulated on the basis of facts collected carefully and analytically for empirical research. In this sense, ideal types are constructs or concepts which are used as methodological devices or tools in our understanding and analysis of any social problem.

To understand ideal types, as used by Max Weber, we explain how ideal types are constructed.

8.3.2 Construction

Ideal types are formulated by the abstraction and combination of an indefinite number of elements, which though found in reality, are rarely or never discovered in specific form. Therefore, Weber does not consider that he is establishing a new conceptual method. He emphasises that he is making explicit what is already done in practice. For the construction of ideal types, the sociologist selects a certain number of traits from the whole which is otherwise confusing and obscure, to constitute an intelligible entity. For example, if we wish to study the state of democracy in India (or for that matter of secularism, communalism, equality a court of law) then our first task will be to define the concept of democracy with the help of its essential and typical characteristics.

Here we can mention some of the essential characteristics of democracy, namely, existence of a multi-party system, universal adult franchise, formation of government by peoples representatives, peoples participation in the decision making, equality before law, respect to majority verdict and each others' views as well. This formulation of a pure type or an ideal type concept of democracy will guide us and work as a tool in our analysis. Any deviation from or conformity to it will unfold the reality. Ideal types, therefore, do not represent the common or the average characteristics but focus on the typical and the essential

characteristics. For instance in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber analyses the characteristics of the 'Calvinist Ethic'. These characteristics are taken from various historical writings and involve those components of Calvinist doctrines which Weber identifies as of particular importance in relation to the formation of the capitalist spirit. Ideal types are thus a selection of certain elements, certain traits or characteristics which are distinctive and relevant to the study undertaken. However, one thing which should be kept in mind here is that though ideal types are constructed from facts existing in reality, they do not represent or describe the total reality, they are of pure types in a logical sense. According to Weber 'in its conceptual purity, this ideal mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality'. This then is the way in which ideal types are constructed. To facilitate our understanding later in this unit we will take up those ideal type concepts which have been used by Weber.

8.3.3 Characteristics

From the above discussion we can draw some important characteristics of ideal types.

- i) Ideal types are not general or average types. That is, they are not defined by the characteristics common to all phenomena or objects of study. They are formulated on the basis of certain typical traits, which are essential to the construction of an ideal type concept.
- ii) Ideal types are not a presentation of total reality or they do not explain everything. They exhibit partial conception of the whole.
- iii) Ideal types are neither a description of any definite concept of reality, nor a hypothesis, but they can aid both in description and explanation. Ideal types are different in scope and usage from descriptive concepts. If descriptive concepts can be used, for instance, in the classification of different sects, and if one wants to apply the distinction in order to analyse the importance of these for the economic activity, then one has to reformulate the concept of sect to emphasise the specific components of sectarianism which have been influential in the economic pursuit. The concept then becomes an ideal typical one, meaning that any descriptive concept can be transformed into an ideal type through abstraction and recombination of certain elements when we wish to explain or analyse rather than describe a phenomenon.
- iv) In this sense we can say that ideal types are also related to the analytic conception of causality, though not, in deterministic terms.
- v) They also help in reaching to general propositions and in comparative analysis.
- vi) Ideal types serve to guide empirical research, and are used in systematisation of data on historical and social reality.

After learning about the meaning, construction and characteristics of ideal type it will not be at all difficult for you to complete Check Your Progress 1.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Tick mark the correct answer to the following question.

What are ideal types?

- a) Ideal types are general types.
- b) Ideal types are average types.
- c) Ideal types are pure types.
- d) Ideal types are normative types.

2) Tick mark True or False box given below each of the following statements.

- | | |
|--|------------|
| a) Ideal type is a description of reality. | True/False |
| b) Ideal type helps in the analysis and explanation of a social phenomenon. | True/False |
| c) Ideal types are constructed by selection of typical and essential traits. | True/False |
| d) Ideal types are hypotheses | True/False |
| e) Ideal types represent a total reality | True/False |
| f) Ideal types help in the causal and in comparative analysis | True/False |

8.4 PURPOSE AND USE OF IDEAL TYPES

Ideal types are constructed to facilitate the analysis of empirical questions. Most researchers are not fully aware of the concepts they use. As a result their formulations often tend to be imprecise and ambiguous, or as Weber himself says, 'the language which the historians talk contains hundreds of words which are ambiguous constructs created to meet the unconsciously conceived need for adequate expression, and whose meaning is definitely felt, but not clearly thought out' (Weber 1949: 92-3).

It is however the job of social scientists to render subject matter intelligible by avoiding confusion and obscurity. For example, we may talk about the construction of ideal types of authority. Weber distinguishes three types of authority, namely, rational, legal, traditional, and charismatic, each of which was defined by the motivation of obedience or by the nature of legitimacy claimed by the leader. Reality presents a mixture or confusion of the three ideal types and because of this very reason we must approach the types of authority with a clear idea. Because these types merge in reality each must be rigorously defined.

Ideal types are not formed out of a nexus of purely conceptual thought, but are created, modified and sharpened through the empirical analysis of concrete problems. This, in turn, increases the precision of that analysis.

We can therefore say that, ideal types are a methodological device which not only help us in the analysis of empirical questions, but also in avoiding obscurity and ambiguity in the concepts used, and in increasing the accuracy of our analysis. Completing Activity 2 at this stage will help you appreciate the process of construction of an ideal type.

Activity 2

You may be aware of the functioning of the institution of Village Panchayat in the rural areas and that of the Municipal Corporation in the urban areas. If you are living in a rural Area, construct an ideal type of a Village Panchayat. If you are living in an urban area, construct an ideal type of a Municipal Corporation. Exchange your note, if possible, with the notes of your co-learners at the Study Centre.

Ideal type, a key term in Weber's methodological essays has been used by him as a device in understanding historical configurations or specific historical problems. For this he constructed ideal types, that is, to understand how events had actually taken place and to show that if some antecedents or other events had not occurred or had occurred differently, the event we are trying to explain would have been different as well. For example, because of the implementation of the land reform laws and penetration of other modernising forces, like education, modern occupation etc., the joint family system has broken down in rural India. This means that there is a causal relation between the event (land reform, education and modern occupation) and the situation (the joint family). In this way ideal type concept also helps in the causal explanation of a phenomenon.

This, however, does not mean that every event has a particular or a specific cause. Weber does not believe that one element of society is determined by another. He conceives the causal relations both in history and sociology as partial and probable relations. It means that a given fragment of reality makes probable or improbable, favourable or unfavourable to another fragment of reality. For instance, certain Marxists would say that private ownership of the means of production makes inevitable the political power of the minority possessing these means. Weber would say that an economic regime of total planning makes a certain type of political organisation more probable. In Weber's work such analysis of causal relations was related to his interest in world wide comparisons or in analysis of events and establishment of general proposition. That is, he used ideal types to build up a conception of a particular historical case, and used the same ideal type conceptions for a comparative analysis. This interdependence of history and sociology appears most clearly in Weber's conception of the ideal type.

Besides examining any particular historical case Max Weber also used ideal types to analyse the abstract elements of social reality and to explain particular kinds of social behaviour. We shall discuss these in greater detail in the following section, dealing with ideal type in the body of Weber's work.

Check Your Progress 2

1) How do we construct ideal type?

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2) What is the purpose of constructing ideal type?

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8.5 IDEAL TYPES IN WEBER’S WORK

Weber used ideal types in three distinctive ways. Indeed, his three kinds of ideal types are distinguished by three levels of abstraction. The first kind of ideal types are rooted in the historical particularities namely, Western city, the Protestant ethics etc. In reality, this kind of ideal types refer to the phenomena that appear only in the specific historical periods and in particular cultural areas. The second kind relates to the abstract elements of social reality, for example, the concepts of bureaucracy or feudalism. These elements of social reality are found in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. The third kind of ideal type relates to the reconstruction of a particular kind of behaviour (Coser 1977: 224). In the following subsections we shall be dealing with each of these kinds of ideal types.

8.5.1 Ideal Types of Historical Particulars

According to Weber capitalism has been fully realised in modern western societies. Weber constructs an ideal type of capitalism by selecting a certain number of traits from the historical whole to constitute an intelligible entity. This was to show that there was a spiritual affinity between Calvinism and the economic ethics of modern capitalist activity. For this he identified those components of Calvinist doctrine which he considered as of particular and significant importance in the formation of capitalist spirit.

The essence of capitalism according to Weber is embodied in that enterprise whose aim is to make maximum profit or to accumulate more and more. These are based on the rational organisation of work and production. It is the conjunction of desire for profit and rational discipline which constitutes the historically unique feature of western capitalism. The desire for profit is satisfied not by speculation or conquest or adventure, but by discipline and rationality.

This is possible with the help of legal administration of the modern state or rational bureaucracy. Hence capitalism is defined as an enterprise working towards unlimited accumulation of profit and functioning according to bureaucratic rationality.

Weber tried to show that there was a close affinity between this type of economic activity and elements of Calvinist doctrine. According to the Calvinist ethic, God is all powerful and above common man. Man has to work for God's glory on earth and this can be done through hardwork and labour which are rational, regular and constant. The calling of the individual is to fulfil his duty to God through the moral conduct of his day to day life whether he is rich or poor. For him work is worship and there is no room for idleness and laziness. This specific character of Calvinistic belief accounted for the relation between Calvinist doctrine and the spirit of capitalism which was characterised by a unique devotion to the earning of wealth through legitimate economic activity. This is rooted in a belief in the value of efficient performance in the chosen vocation as a duty and a virtue.

The affinity between the two and the emergence of Capitalist economic regime as defined by Weber existed only in the west, which made it a historically unique phenomenon. In Calvinist ethic, religious and economic activities are combined in a way not found either in Catholicism or in any other world religion like Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Judaism and Buddhism of which Weber made a comparative analysis.

8.5.2 Abstract Elements of Social Reality

These elements of social reality are found in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Bureaucracy and types of authority and types of action are important examples of these abstract elements. Let us examine these three examples.

i) Bureaucracy

Weber pointed out that bureaucracy was the best administrative form for the rational or efficient pursuit of organisational goals. See Box 8.2 to understand what bureaucracy means.

Box 8.2 Bureaucracy

General meaning of the term bureaucracy is the rule by departmental or administrative officials following inflexible procedures. Max Weber emphasized the indispensability of bureaucracy for the rational attainment of the goals of any organization in industrial society (Mitchell 1968:21)

Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy comprised various elements such as (a) high degree of specialisation and a clearly-defined division of labour, with tasks distributed as official duties, (b) hierarchical structure of authority with clearly circumscribed areas of command and responsibility, (c) establishment of a formal

body of rules to govern the operation of the organisation and administration based on written documents, (d) impersonal relationships between organisational members and the clients, (e) recruitment of personnel based on ability and technical knowledge, (f) long term employment, promotion on the basis of seniority and merit, (g) fixed salary and the separation of private and official income.

Though examples of developed bureaucracies existed in different parts of the world prior to the emergence of modern capitalism, it is only within this that organisations are found which approximate to this ideal typical form. Weber used these abstract elements of bureaucracy to explain a concrete phenomenon.

ii) Types of Authority

To understand the various aspects of authority Max Weber constructed its ideal types in terms of three types of authority. These are traditional, rational and charismatic.

Traditional authority is based upon the belief in the sanctity of age- old customs and rules. Rational authority is maintained by laws, decrees, regulations. Charismatic authority is characterised by exceptional virtue possessed by or attributed to the leader by those who follow the leader, have confidence in the leader and are devoted to the leader.

8.5.3 Reconstruction of a Particular Kind of Behaviour

This ideal type includes those elements that constitute rationalising reconstructions of a particular kind of behaviour. For example, according to Weber, all propositions in economic theory are merely ideal typical reconstructions of the ways people would behave if they were pure economic subjects. These include laws of supply and demand, marginal utilities etc. Supply of commodity in the market governs prices in relation to demand. Similarly, utility of a commodity for consumption is higher or lower depending upon the units available for consumption. Economic theory rigorously conceives economic behaviour as consistent with its essence. This essence is often defined in a precise manner (Weber 1964: 210). It is now time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) In what sense Weber used the concept of ideal type to show the relationship between Calvinist ethic and the spirit of capitalism?

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2) What are the major characteristics of ideal type of bureaucracy as outlined by Max Weber?

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3) What are the four ideal types of social actions stated by Max Weber?

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8.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit began with a clarification of the general meaning of the terms ‘ideal’ and ‘type’. We discussed the concept and characteristics of ideal type as associated with Max Weber’s writings. Ideal types are those constructs or concepts which are formulated for interpretation and explanation of social reality. Weber used ideal types in three distinctive ways. First, he used ideal types of historical particulars to explain Protestant ethics that appeared only in specific historical periods and in particular cultural areas. Secondly he used ideal type to explain abstract elements of social reality, namely, bureaucracy, types of authority, social action and so on. His third kind of ideal type relates to the reconstruction of particular kind of behaviour. We examined in detail the use of ideal type in Weber’s work in this unit.

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8.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) c
- 2) a) False
b) True
c) True
d) False
e) False
f) True

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Ideal types are constructed by selecting those characteristics or elements of an object of study, which are considered essential or typical to it.
- 2) Ideal types are formulated, first, to understand and analyse a particular social phenomenon or problem; secondly, to avoid confusion or obscurity in the concepts used and thirdly, to increase the precision and accuracy of the analysis.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Weber constructed ideal type of capitalism and identified those components of Protestant ethic which he thought were of significant importance in the formation of capitalist spirit and was responsible for the rise of modern capitalism in the West.
- 2) According to Max Weber the ideal typical characteristics of bureaucracy are: division of labour and specialisation, work distributed as official duties, hierarchy or offices with clearly defined areas of command and responsibility, formal body of rules to govern, written documents, impersonal relations, recruitment on the basis of merit, separation of private and official income, promotion and fixed salary.
- 3) Max Weber has talked about four types of social actions. These are as follows:
 - a) Rational Action with reference to Goal — e.g. the action of the collector who makes preparation for the coming election.
 - b) Rational Action with reference to value — e.g. the action of the soldier who risks his life for one's country.
 - c) Affective Action — e.g. the abuses given by the bowler to the empire in a cricket match for not giving the batsperson out.
 - d) Traditional Action — e.g. the action of taking bath by an individual after coming from the cremation ground.

UNIT 9 POWER AND AUTHORITY*

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Concepts of Power and Authority
 - 9.2.1 Power
 - 9.2.2 Authority
 - 9.2.3 Elements of Authority
- 9.3 Types of Authority
 - 9.3.1 Traditional Authority
 - 9.3.2 Charismatic Authority
 - 9.3.3 Rational-Legal Authority
- 9.4 Bureaucracy
 - 9.4.1 Major Features of Bureaucracy
 - 9.4.2 Characteristics of Officials in Bureaucracy
- 9.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.6 References
- 9.7 Specimen Answers To Check Your Progress

9.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the concepts of power and authority as explained by Max Weber;
- show the connections between Weber's types of social action and types of authority;
- describe in detail the three types of authority namely, traditional, charismatic and rational-legal; and
- describe bureaucracy as the instrument for the operation of rational-legal authority.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, you will find some of Weber's important contributions in understanding power and authority. We begin section 9.2 with a brief discussion of the sociological concepts of power and authority with special reference to Weber understands of the terms. In section 9.3 we discuss the types of social action that Weber identifies and the types of authority that flow from them, namely, traditional charismatic and rational-legal authority. In section 9.4 we focus on the instrument through which rational-legal authority is exercised, namely, bureaucracy.

*Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Unit 16 of *Sociological Thought* (ESO 13) with modifications by Nita Mathur

9.2 POWER AND AUTHORITY

Let us now examine the key concepts of power and authority, both, in the general sociological sense as well as in the specific Weberian context.

9.2.1 Power

In ordinary usage, the term 'power' means strength or the capacity to control. Sociologists describe it as the ability of an individual or group to fulfil its desires and implement its decisions and ideas. It involves the ability to influence and/ or control the behaviour of others even against their will.

For Max Weber, power is an aspect of social relationships. It refers to the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behaviour of another person. Power is present in social interaction and creates situations of inequality since the one who has power imposes it on others. The impact of power varies from situation to situation. On the one hand, it depends on the capacity of the powerful individual to exercise power. On the other hand it depends upon the extent to which it is opposed or resisted by the others. Weber says that power can be exercised in all walks of life.

It is not restricted to a battlefield or to politics. It is to be observed in the market place, on a lecture platform, at a social gathering, in sports, scientific discussions and even through charity. For example, giving alms or 'daan' to a beggar is a subtle way of exercising your superior economic power. You can bring a smile of joy to the beggar's face or a feeling of despair by giving or refusing alms.

What are the sources of power? Weber discusses two contrasting sources of power. These are as follows:

- a) Power which is derived from a constellation of interests that develop in a formally free market. For example, a group of producers of sugar controls supply of their production in the market to maximise their profit.
- b) An established system of authority that allocates the right to command and the duty to obey. For example, in the army, a jawan is obliged to obey the command of his officer. The officer derives his power through an established system of authority.

As you have seen in the last point, any discussion of power leads us to think about its legitimacy. It is legitimacy, which according to Weber constitutes the core point of authority. Let us now examine the concept of authority.

9.2.2 Authority

The German word “Herrschaft”, used by Weber, has been variously translated. Some sociologists term it as ‘authority’, others as ‘domination’ or ‘command’. Herrschaft is a situation in which a ‘Herr’ or master dominates or commands others. Raymond Aron (1967: 187) defines Herrschaft as the master’s ability to obtain the obedience of those who theoretically owe it to him. In this unit, Weber’s concept of Herrschaft will denote the term “authority”.

A question may be raised, namely, what is the difference between power and authority? Power, as you have seen, refers to the ability or capacity to control another. Authority refers to legitimised power. It means that the master has the right to command and can expect to be obeyed.

Let us now see the elements that constitute authority.

9.2.3 Elements of Authority

For a system of authority to exist the following elements must be present:

- i) An individual ruler/master or a group of rulers/masters.
- ii) An individual/group that is ruled.
- iii) The will of the ruler to influence the conduct of the ruled which may be expressed through commands.
- iv) Evidence of the influence of the rulers in terms of compliance or obedience shown by the ruled.
- v) Direct or indirect evidence which shows that the ruled have internalised and accepted the fact that the ruler’s commands must be obeyed.

We see that authority implies a reciprocal relationship between the rulers and the ruled. The rulers believe that they have the legitimate right to exercise their authority. On the other hand, the ruled accept this power and comply with it, reinforcing its legitimacy.

It is time to complete Activity 1 and Check Your Progress 1.

Activity 1

Give example of at least five authority from your daily life. What are the elements involved in them? Prepare a note of one page on them. Exchange your note, if possible, with the co-learners at your Study Centre.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Define power.

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2) What are two important sources of power?

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3) Point out three important elements of authority.

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Let us now examine the types of authority identified by Weber. Before we do so, it is very important to study his typology of social action. The types of authority Weber discusses are, as you will soon see, closely linked with the types of social action.

9.3 TYPES OF AUTHORITY

As you have already read, authority implies legitimacy. According to Weber, there are three systems of legitimation, each with its corresponding norms, which justify the power to command. It is these systems of legitimation which are designated as the following types of authority.

- i) Traditional authority
- ii) Charismatic authority
- iii) Rational-legal authority

Let us describe each of these types in some detail.

9.3.1 Traditional Authority

This system of legitimation flows from traditional action. In other words, it is based on customary law and the sanctity of ancient traditions. It is based on the belief that a certain authority is to be respected because it has existed since time immemorial.

In traditional authority, rulers enjoy personal authority by virtue of their inherited status. Their commands are in accordance with customs and they also possess the right to extract compliance from the ruled. Often, they abuse their power. The persons who obey them are ‘subjects’ in the fullest sense of the term. They obey their master out of personal loyalty or a pious regard for his time-honoured status. Let us take an example from our own society. You are familiar with the caste system in India. Why did the ‘lower’ castes bear the atrocities inflicted by the ‘upper’ castes for centuries? One way of explaining this is because the authority of the ‘upper’ castes had the backing of tradition and antiquity. The ‘lower’ castes some say had become socialised into accepting their oppression. Thus, we can see that traditional authority is based on the belief in the sacred quality of long-standing traditions. This gives legitimacy to those who exercise authority.

Traditional authority does not function through written rules or laws. It is transmitted by inheritance down the generations. Traditional authority is carried out with the help of relatives and personal favourites.

In modern times, the incidence of traditional authority has declined. Monarchy, the classic example of traditional authority still exists, but in a highly diluted form. The Queen of England is a traditional figure of authority but as you may be aware, she does not actually exercise her authority. The laws of the land are enacted in her name, but their content is decided by the legislators, the representatives of the people. The queen has a parliament, which governs the kingdom, but she does not appoint ministers. She is a nominal head of state.

Briefly, traditional authority derives its legitimacy from longstanding traditions, which enable some to command and compel others to obey. It is hereditary authority and does not require written rules. The ‘masters’ exercise their authority with the help of loyal relatives and friends. Weber considers this kind of authority as irrational. It is therefore rarely found in modern developed societies.

9.3.2 Charismatic Authority

Charisma means an extraordinary quality possessed by some individuals (see Box 9.1). This gives such people unique powers to capture the fancy and devotion of ordinary people. Charismatic authority is based on extraordinary devotion to an individual and to the way of life preached by this person. The legitimacy of such authority rests upon the belief in the supernatural or magical powers of the person. The charismatic leader ‘proves’ his/her power through miracles, military and other victories or the dramatic prosperity of the disciples. As long as charismatic leaders continue to ‘prove’ their miraculous powers in the eyes of their disciples, their authority stays intact. You may have realised that the type of social action that charismatic authority is related to is affective action. The disciples are in a highly charged emotional state as a result of the teachings and appeal of the charismatic leaders. They worship their hero.

Box 9.1 Charisma

Dictionary meaning of the term charisma is a divinely inspired gift. It is gift of divine grace. This term is used to Weber to denote “a kind of power over others which is also perceived as authority by those subject to it. the holder of charisma may be a human being, in which case his authority might be interpreted in terms of myth of the divine mission, insight or moral attributes” (see Scruton 1982: 58).

Charismatic authority is not dependent on customary beliefs or written rules. It is purely the result of the special qualities of the leader who governs or rules in his personal capacity. Charismatic authority is not organized therefore there is no paid staff or administrative set-up. The leader and his assistants do not have a regular occupation and often reject their family responsibilities. These characteristics sometimes make charismatic leaders revolutionaries, as they have rejected all the conventional social obligations and norms.

Based, as it is, on the personal qualities of an individual, the problem of succession arises with the death or disappearance of the leader. The person who succeeds the leader may not have charismatic powers. In order to transmit the original message of the leader, some sort of organisation develops. The original charisma gets transformed either into traditional authority or rational-legal authority. Weber calls this routinisation of charisma.

If the charismatic figure is succeeded by a son/daughter or some close relative, traditional authority results. If, on the other hand, charismatic qualities are identified and written down, then it changes into rational legal authority, where anyone acquiring these qualities can become a leader. Charismatic authority can thus be described as unstable and temporary. We can find examples of charismatic leaders throughout history. Saints, prophets and some political leaders are examples of such authority. Kabir, Nanak, Jesus, Mohammed, Lenin and Mahatma Gandhi, to name a few were charismatic leaders. They were revered by people for their personal qualities and the message they preached, not because they represented traditional or rational-legal authority. Let us now describe the third type of authority identified by Max Weber.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Tick mark the correct answer.

Which one of the following is not a type of authority according to Weber?

- a) Traditional authority
- b) Rational-legal authority
- c) Charismatic authority
- d) Personal authority

2) Tick mark the correct answer.

When the original charisma of a leader gets transformed into traditional or rational-legal authority, what does Weber call it?

- a) Routinisation of one's power to capture devotion of ordinary people
- b) Routinisation of charisma
- c) Routinisation of one's ability to lead
- d) Routinisation of one's capacity to control the behaviour of other's against their will

3) Tick mark the correct answer.

Traditional authority derive legitimacy from

- a) Law of the land
- b) Long standing customary law
- c) Outstanding performance of the leader
- d) All of the above.

9.3.3 Rational-legal Authority

The term refers to a system of authority, which are both, rational and legal. It is vested in a regular administrative staff who operate in accordance with certain written rules and laws. Those who exercise authority are appointed to do so on the basis of their achieved qualifications, which are prescribed and codified. Those in authority consider it a profession and are paid a salary. Thus, it is a rational system.

It is legal because it is in accordance with the laws of the land which people recognise and feel obliged to obey. The people acknowledge and respect the legality of both, the ordinance and rules as well as the positions or titles of those who implement the rules.

Rational-legal authority is a typical feature of modern society. It is the reflection of the process of rationalisation. Remember that Weber considers rationalisation as the key feature of western civilisation. It is, according to Weber, a specific product of human thought and deliberation. By now you have clearly grasped the connection between rational-legal authority and rational action for obtaining goals.

Let us look at examples of rational-legal authority. We obey the tax collector because we believe in the legality of the ordinances he enforces. We also believe that he has the legal right to send us taxation notices. We stop our vehicles when the traffic policeman orders us to do so because we respect the authority vested in him by the law. Modern societies are governed not by individuals, but by laws and ordinances. We obey the policeman because of his position and his uniform which represents the law, not because he is Mr. 'X' or Mr. 'Y'. Rational-legal authority exists not just in the political and administrative spheres, but also in economic organisations like banks and industries as well as in religious and cultural organisations.

Activity 2

Give an example of rational –legal or a traditional authority from your own society with special reference to the basis of legitimacy of that authority. Prepare note of one page. Exchange your note, if possible, with the notes of your co-learners at your Study Centre.

9.4 BUREAUCRACY

Bureaucracy, as just mentioned, is the machinery, which implements rational-legal authority. Max Weber studied bureaucracy in detail and constructed an ideal type which contained the most prominent characteristics of bureaucracy. Let us examine this ideal type which reveals to us the major features of bureaucracy.

9.4.1 Major Features of Bureaucracy

- i) In order that the bureaucracy may function adequately, it relies on the following rules and regulations.
 - a) The activities which comprise bureaucracy are distributed among the officials in the form of official duties.
 - b) There is a stable or regular system by which officials are vested with authority. This authority is strictly delimited by the laws of the land.
 - c) There are strict and methodical procedures which ensure that officials perform their duties adequately.

The above mentioned three characteristics constitute ‘bureaucratic authority’, which is to be found in developed and modern societies.

- ii) The second feature of bureaucracy is that there is a hierarchy of officials in authority. By this we mean that there is a firmly built structure of subordination and superordination. Lower officials are supervised by higher ones and are answerable to them. The advantage of this system is that governed people can express their dissatisfaction with lower officials by appealing to the higher ones. For instance, if you are dissatisfied with the behaviour or performance of a clerk or a section officer in an office, you can appeal to the higher official to seek redress.
- iii) The management of the bureaucratic office is carried out through written documents or files. They are preserved and properly kept by clerks who are specially appointed for this purpose.
- iv) The work in the bureaucratic office is highly specialised and staff is trained accordingly.

- v) A fully developed bureaucratic office demands the full working capacity of the staff. In such a case, officials may be compelled to work over-time.

Having looked the main features of a bureaucratic set-up, let us now learn something about the officials that you have found repeatedly mentioned above.

9.4.2 Characteristics of Officials in Bureaucracy

Weber mentions the following characteristics of officials in a bureaucratic set-up

- i) Office-work is a ‘vocation’ for officials.
- ii) They are specially trained for their jobs.
- iii) Their qualifications determine their position or rank in the office.
- iv) They are expected to do their work honestly.

Their official positions also have a bearing on their personal lives. Let us see how.

- i) Bureaucratic officials enjoy a high status in society.
- ii) Often, their jobs carry transfer liabilities. By this we mean that they may be transferred from one place or department to another leading to some instability in their professional and personal lives.
- iii) Officials receive salaries not in accordance with productivity but status. The higher their rank, the higher their salaries. They also receive benefits like pension, provident fund, medical and other facilities. Their jobs are considered very secure.
- iv) Officials enjoy good career prospects. They can move from the lower rungs of the bureaucratic ladder to higher ones if they work in a disciplined manner.

It is time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Bureaucracy is an example of
 - a) traditional authority
 - b) rational-legal authority
 - c) charismatic authority
 - d) none of the above .

- 2) Mention in the important features of bureaucratic authority.

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- 3) Mention the important characteristics of the officials of bureaucracy.

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9.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit began with a discussion of the Weberian concepts of ‘power’ and ‘authority’. It then went on to discuss the types of social action identified by Max Weber, followed by the types of authority described by him. Next you studied traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority in some detail. Finally, the unit focused upon bureaucracy as the instrument through which rational-legal authority operates. Not only did the unit outline the features of a bureaucratic office but also the officials or staff that constitute it.

9.6 REFERENCES

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9.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Power is one’s capacity to impose his or her will on others.
- 2) Power can be derived from a constellation of interests that develop in a formally free market situation. Power can again be derived from an established system of authority that allocates the right to command and duty to obey.
- 3)
 - a) Presence of individual ruler/master or a group of rulers/masters
 - b) Presence of an individual/group that is ruled
 - c) Evidence of influence of the rulers in terms of compliance and obedience shown by the ruled

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) d
- 2) b
- 3) a
- 4) b

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) b)
- 2) Important features of bureaucratic authority are:
 - a) it operates on the principle of jurisdictional area which relies on certain administrative regulations.
 - b) there is a stable regular system by which officials are vested with authority.
 - c) there are strict and methodical procedures which ensure that officials perform their duties adequately.
- 3) Important characteristics of the officials of bureaucracy are that:
 - a) office work is a vocation for the official
 - b) officials are especially trained for their job
 - c) their qualifications determine their position or rank in the office, and
 - d) they are expected to do work honestly.

