all the best
Max Weber (1864-1920)

It is difficult not to compare the work of the German social theorist Max Weber (1864-1920) with that of Karl Marx. It could even be suggested that a full appreciation of key aspects of Weber’s work only emerges by making this comparison. There comparisons are inevitable since the writings of Marx, and the political claims of the Marxists who followed him, provided much of the academic and political context of Weber’s own social theory. It is important to remember, however, that Weber’s understanding of Marx was very limited since many of Marx’s most important works (the Paris Manuscripts, The German Ideology, the Grundrisse) were not available during Weber’s lifetime. The Marx that Weber did know was mostly based on his economic writings and The Communist Manifesto, and even these as they were being interpreted, rather simplistically, by the German Social Democratic Party in the 1890s. For Weber, Marx was the author of an original, but rigid and one-sidedly materialist, theory of historical development, a point that he tries to prove by offering an alternative explanation of the emergence of modern capitalism in his famous essay published in 1904/05, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.

Having boldly stated the need for comparing Weber with Marx we need to qualify this by saying that not all of Weber’s work should be treated in this way. The comparison actually relates to the fairly specific topic of what social theory has to say about the origins and nature of modern industrial capitalism. To the extent that Weber’s political concerns, his worries about the feasibility of socialism and the dominance of economic interests, can all be seen in terms of the rise of capitalism then the comparison is fair enough. Weber did have other interests, however, such as his analysis of German society and politics, his comparative history of the world religions, and the contribution he made to the methodology of social theory, which often have very little to do with Marx and Marxism.

Let us now briefly discuss the biographical and political context of Weber’s work. The accusation that Weber produced bourgeois social theory as opposed to the proletarian social theory of Marx is partly based on the fact that Weber came from a wealthy establishment family, and thus had the benefits of a privileged education and good social and career prospects. Following his father (who was a member of the German Parliament), he trained as a lawyer in Berlin and then took a doctorate in economics in 1889. He gained his first academic post in 1893, and only three years later became professor of economics at Freiburg University in 1896 at the remarkably young age of 32 (he later held posts at Heidelberg and Munich). He then suffered the first of a series of serious bouts of psychological illness that forced him to give up his job and abandon academic work for the next six years. The period between 1905 and around 1915 was his most productive,
beginning with the publication of two extended essays as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1904/05. He then worked intermittently on a number of detailed studies in economics, religion, the development of the legal system and other social institutions. These subsequently appeared in print as *Economy and Society* (1921), *The Religion of India* and *The Religion of China* (both published in 1916). *The General Economic History* (1927) was compiled from a series of lectures he gave in Freiburg during 1919-20, and *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences* was published posthumously in 1922 from a variety of articles and lectures given between 1903 and 1917. In most cases, complete English translations only became available during the 1950s and 1960s. Weber died from pneumonia in 1920 at the age of 56.

In terms of the kind of society in which Weber worked, the dominant political issue was the decline of the liberal, Protestant and highly individualist attitude of the established middle classes, and the emergence of an authoritarian, militarised, bureaucratic regime that accompanied the rise of the ‘new Germany’ following Bismarck’s unification of the German states in 1870. The success of the new regime rested on an alliance between the landowner class of Junkers (who were forced to rely on political power as their economic power declined), the military and the emerging classes of industrialists, financiers, bankers and career bureaucrats. In the last decades of the 19th century, Germany went through a period of rapid industrialisation, a process that was accompanied by the emergence of the German industrial working class although not, significantly, of an independent bourgeois middle class of the kind found in Britain, France and elsewhere. For Weber and many of his contemporaries, the demise of traditional liberal values of personal responsibility and autonomy, and their replacement with a much more paternalistic notion of national service, was a matter of great concern. Both Weber and his father made various attempts to express this opposition in the political sphere. The rather pessimistic tone of Weber’s work, his sense that German society and its liberal values were in decline, certainly reflects his rather dismal political outlook.

Whereas Marx began his academic career by engaging with the abstract philosophical debates engendered by Hegelian idealism, Weber started out with the altogether more practical intention of training as a lawyer and economist. The emergence of a specifically social-theoretical emphasis in his interests really only arose after he had already begun to analyse specific topics as part of his professional work. Weber tended to deal with the more conceptual challenges of social theory on a need-to-know basis. In this sense, Weber was more interested in getting on with studying actual things than in devoting time either to establishing an entire account of historical development, as Marx had done, or to developing a set of principles for turning the study of social phenomena into a proper science, in
the manner of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. This approach accounts for why there is no unifying theme in Weber’s work, no overall framework into which each of his concepts and ideas can be fitted. Whether he liked it or not, however, Weber could not help but become involved in the heated discussions about the role of social-scientific study, and the differences between this and the natural sciences, that were taking place in intellectual and academic circles in Germany around 1900. These philosophical debates began with a revival during the 1890s, in Germany and elsewhere, of one of the old chestnuts of philosophy and social theory, which is the distinction between empirical knowledge, that is, knowledge that comes through physical sensation, and rational knowledge, that is, knowledge in the form of the ideas and other intellectual constructs through which it is made intelligible in the mind.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a German philosopher, had argued that while knowledge of the real world was something that comes through our physical senses, it can only be made sense of once this information has been structured and organised by the mind. The human mind thus imposes a rational structure on the raw data of experience and feeling. All knowledge is thus a production of rational intellectual processing and as such reality cannot be regarded as a thing that is entirely distinguishable from knowledge of it. Reality ‘in itself’ cannot be known. (Kant’s position is dualistic because he accepts the necessary combination of sense perception and cognitive reason. Hegel is monistic as he emphasises the absolute primacy of intellectual reason alone.)

Kant tried to reconcile his rationalist view with the strict objectivism and empiricism of John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-96) who argue that all our ideas and concepts, including both physical sensations and intellectual reflections, are derived from practical experience of the world around us and not from pre-existing capacities of the human mind. From an empiricist viewpoint, there cannot be any knowledge or consciousness until after we have had physical contact with the material world around us. This dispute over the two basic kinds of knowledge – knowledge derived a priori from within the conscious mind and knowledge derived retrospectively from sense perception – provides an important backdrop to debates about the nature of social-scientific knowledge.

Kant further argued that the free individual was intuitively capable of moral self-direction. As natural objects (objects of investigation), the properties or behaviors of individuals could be investigated according to the same scientific methodologies that would be appropriate for any natural object. As moral subjects, however, individuals are not part of the natural world, for God has given the individual free choice to act in either a moral or an immoral fashion. A civilized society is one that encourages individuals to act morally. But society cannot
deterministically generate morality because moral action is always, in part, an outcome of free will.

The Kantian emphasis on the dualism of the individual - the view of man as both natural object and moral subject - strongly influenced Simmel and Weber. Both of these latter theorists were Kantian in their belief that, in the final analysis, the moral decisions of individuals never could be judged good or bad from a sociological point of view. For Simmel and Weber, sociology, unlike biology or chemistry, had to come to terms with the fact that, to some extent, the individual was not, and could not be, constrained by determinate laws. Kant’s greatest impact on modern thought then was perhaps the idea that as a rational, independent moral entity, the individual is free from at least some extrinsic, causal determinants of behaviour.

The younger followers of Kant or ‘neo- Kantians’ were faced with the problem of defending the rationalist approach, used in the historical, cultural and social sciences, against the empiricist approach of the natural sciences. The considerable success of the natural sciences during the 19th century (a success that was reinforced with every new advance in technology or feat of industrial engineering), allowed the empiricists to suggest that the kind of knowledge that was generated by the speculative, metaphysical and inductive approach of the social sciences, really did not constitute proper knowledge at all. Indeed, there was no reason to suppose that the search for the general ‘laws of motion’ of social phenomena should not be carried out using the tried-and-tested empirical methodology and methods of the natural sciences.

The neo-Kantians, and other interested parties including Max Weber, thus turned their attention to these issues:

- They wanted to challenge the idea that the kind of knowledge generated by the natural sciences was the only kind of knowledge available.
- They wanted to show that the two kinds of science had to be different because they were looking at two fundamentally different kinds of phenomena.
- If these points are valid, then it was obvious that two distinct methodologies were required to investigate them.

These philosophical debates, between the positivists and anti-positivists, which began in Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth century, are popularly referred as Methodenstreit. For some three decades prior to the outbreak of the First World War, German academic life was dominated by a number of related disputes about methodology (the so-called Methodenstreit), the most general and
probably the most important of which dealt with the relationship between the natural and social sciences.

One group led by Carl Menger, an economist, who advocated the use of positive science methods in social sciences as well. He argued that the scientific methodology of natural sciences should be used to arrive at general theories in social sciences – seeing human motives and social interaction as far too complex to be amenable to statistical analysis. On the other hand, the anti-positivist scholars (particularly the neo-Kantians) emphasized upon the subjective dimension of social reality and thus, did not see the possibility of any kind of universal generalizations in social sciences.

It will be useful to begin by outlining the controversy between those who think of sociology in terms of natural science and those who think of it as being quite different from any natural science and perhaps more like history or philosophy. What are the differences between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ which would require radically different methods of enquiry? They were first clearly stated by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and were then widely discussed by German historians and philosophers, especially Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915) and Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936).

There are two major differences between the natural world and the social or cultural world. First, the natural world can only be observed and explained from the outside, while the world of human activity can be observed and comprehended from the inside, and is only intelligible because we ourselves belong to this world and have to do with the products of minds similar to our own. Secondly, the relations between phenomena of the natural world are mechanical relations of causality, whereas the relations between phenomena of the human world are relations of value and purpose. It follows from this, in Dilthey’s view, that the ‘human studies’ should be concerned, not with the establishment of causal connections or the formulation of universal laws, but with the construction of typologies of personality and culture which would serve as the framework for understanding human strivings and purposes in different historical situations. Dilthey contrasted ‘nature’ and ‘society’ in terms of their subject-matter. He argued that reality can be divided into autonomous sectors – a fundamental distinction being that between the realms of ‘nature’ and ‘human spirit’ – with each sector being the prerogative of a separate category of sciences. In other words, Dilthey believed that since social or cultural science studied acting individuals with ideas and intentions, a special method of understanding (Verstehen) was required, while natural science studied soulless things and, consequently, it did not need to understand its objects.
Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915), one of the leading neo-Kantians, on the other hand proposed a logical distinction between natural and social sciences on the basis of their methods. Natural sciences, according to Windelband, use a ‘nomothetic’ or generalizing method, whereas social sciences employ an ‘ideographic’ or individualizing procedure, since they are interested in the non-recurring events in reality and the particular or unique aspects of any phenomenon. He argued that the kinds of knowledge generated by the natural and the social sciences were different because they were looking at two different levels of reality. Whereas the natural scientists were concerned with material objects and with describing the general laws that governed their origins and interactions, social and cultural scientists were concerned with the ethical realm of human action and culture. Although knowledge of natural phenomena could be achieved directly through observation and experimentation, knowledge of human motivation, of norms and patterns of conduct, and of social and cultural values, necessarily had to be based on a more abstract process of theoretical reasoning. You can only infer that somebody is in love; you cannot actually see ’love’.

The association of social phenomena with values was also considered by the German philosopher Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936) who strongly influenced Weber’s views on the matter. Rickert (who was himself adopting a famous distinction between fact and value that had been made by the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume [1711-76]), argued that the natural sciences are ‘sciences of fact’ and so questions of value were necessarily excluded from the analysis. The social sciences, in contrast, are ‘sciences of value’ because they are specifically concerned with understanding why social actors choose to act in the ways that they do. While it is appropriate to disregard questions of value when studying the physical or chemical properties of things, it is certainly not appropriate to do so when studying human social action and its consequences. It is relatively easy to show what the properties of carbon are, where it comes from and what will happen if you combine it with some other material. What you never need to do is explain how carbon atoms feel about any of these things.

The prevalent intellectual and political context had a deep influence on Weber in shaping his perspective as well as ideas on subject matter. Weber partly accepted and partly rejected all the three major theoretical orientations. For example, he accepted the positivists’ argument for the scientific study of social phenomena and appreciated the need for arriving at generalizations if sociology has to be a social science. But, he criticized the positivists for not taking into account the unique meanings and motives of the social actors into consideration. Further, he argued that sociology, given the variable nature of the social phenomena, could only aspire for limited generalizations (which he called ‘thesis’), not universal generalizations as advocated by the positivists.
Similarly, Weber appreciated the neo-Kantians for taking into cognizance the subjective meanings and motives of the social actors in order to better understand the social reality but also stressed the need for building generalizations in social sciences. As stated earlier, taking a cue from Immanuel Kant, the neo-Kantian scholars argued that the reality is of two kinds, natural reality and social reality. What distinguishes social reality from the natural reality is the presence of ‘Geist’ (Spirit or Consciousness) and by virtue of the presence of Geist, human beings respond to the external stimuli in a meaningful manner, not mechanically as the physical objects do. Therefore, human behaviour can only be understood in the light of these meanings. Thus social sciences should try to understand the human behaviour from the actor’s point of view keeping in mind the meaning and motives that underlie such behaviour.

Weber, agreeing with the neo-Kantians, believed that human beings respond to their environment in a meaningful way and therefore, human behaviour has to be understood in the context of the underlying meanings. Therefore, Weber argued that to build the strategies of social research on the methods of natural sciences alone would be a serious mistake. The methodology of social sciences should focus on understanding the human behaviour. According to Weber, the cognitive aim of social sciences is to understand the human behaviour. A sociological explanation should therefore be meaningfully as well as causally adequate. (Please note that the causal explanations are used in all sciences. Social sciences should also use causal explanations but besides the causal explanation, the explanation in social sciences should be adequate at the level of meanings as well. That is how the cognitive aim of social sciences goes beyond that of the natural sciences.)

However, Weber criticized the neo-Kantians’ proposition that generalizations are not possible in social sciences. Weber argued that all sciences, whether natural or social, begin with the study of a particular phenomenon and try to arrive at some generalization. Though Weber admitted that social sciences may not attain as much success in arriving at generalizations as natural sciences because the ability to discover generalizations is dependent upon the degree to which there is a pattern in the reality. So, given the variable nature of the social phenomena, social sciences could only aspire for limited generalizations. He further argued generalizations arrived in social sciences would not have the same exactitude as of those in natural sciences. Such generalizations would merely be indicative of a trend or tendency. Weber argued that we may call such limited generalizations as ‘thesis’ rather than the ‘theory’.

Weber also partly accepted Marx’s view on class conflict (economic factors) in society but argued that there could be other dimensions of the conflict as well such as status, power, etc. Further, Weber was also skeptical about the inevitability
of revolution as forecasted by Marx. Weber accepted the Marxian logic of explaining conflict and change in terms of interplay of economic forces but at the same time criticized Marxian theory as mono-causal economic determinism. According to Weber, the social phenomenon is far too complex to be explained adequately in terms of a single cause. Hence Weber argued that the social science methodology should be based on the principle of causal pluralism. (Please note that Weber was not rejecting the Marxian theory but rather supplementing it. Weber agreed with Marx that economic factors do have a profound influence on social life. But he considered economic factor as only one of the factors that influence social life.)

To summarize, Weber is regarded to have been influenced by ‘neo-Kantian’ ideas in his perception of the nature of social life. According to him, behaviour of man in society is qualitatively different from that of physical objects and biological organisms. What accounts for these differences is the presence of meanings and motives which underlie the social behaviour of man. Thus any study of human behaviour in society must take cognizance of these meanings to understand this behaviour. The cognitive aims or objectives of sociological studies are, therefore, different from those of positive sciences. While positive sciences seek to discover the underlying patterns of interactions between various aspects of physical and natural phenomena, the social sciences, on the other hand, seek to understand the meanings and motives to explain the social phenomena. Hence positive science method alone would prove inadequate to study the social behaviour. However, Weber was not opposed to building generalization in social sciences, but, he pointed out that given the variable nature of social phenomena, only limited generalization can be made.

Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of ‘social action’ which constitutes the basic unit of social life. In consonance with his general perception of the nature of social reality, he defined social action as ‘the meaningful behaviour oriented towards other individuals’. Presence of meanings as well as other individuals is equally important for any behaviour to qualify as social action. For Weber, the combined qualities of ‘action’ and ‘meaning’ were the ‘central facts’ for sociology’s scientific analysis. Weber defined sociology as “a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects.” The technical category of ‘action’ described in Weber’s work is all human behavior to which an actor attaches subjective meaning. “Action is social,” explains Weber, “in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual, it takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” However, an isolated social act does not exist in real social life. Only at the analytical level can one conceptualize an isolated social act. What
exists in reality is an on-going chain of reciprocal social actions, which we call social interaction.

Thus, according to Weber, sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action. For Weber, social action is the basic unit of social life and hence the subject matter of sociology. This logically follows from his basic assumption that individuals are cultural beings but have an ability to take a deliberate stand of their own. Therefore, individuals are capable of attributing a subjective meaning to their behaviour. Thus, as a sociologist, one must look at human behaviour as social action. As stated earlier, there are two elements of social action viz. presence of meaning and orientation towards others. In the absence of assigned ‘meanings’ by the individuals, the actions are meaningless and thus outside the purview of sociology. Similarly, the actions which are not oriented towards others are also outside the purview of sociology.

Now, since meanings are the fundamental character of social action, so if the nature of meanings changes, the type of social action also undergoes change. Thus, based on the nature of meanings, Weber constructed a classificatory typology of social action. However, he cautioned that this classificatory typology is only for the purpose of analysis. Though it is rooted in reality but it does not mirror the reality. He based his classification of social action on the pure types of meanings, although such pure types of meanings are never found in reality. Weber argued that social reality is infinitely complex. There is an infinite variety of meanings that can exist in social life. However, according to Weber, all these meanings can be analytically reduced to four pure types of meanings. These four pure types of meanings are not found in reality. In reality, any given social action reflects a combination of two or more pure types of meanings.

Thus, based on these four pure types of meanings, there are four pure types of social actions. Weber classified social action into four major types on the basis of the nature of meaning involved. These four types of social action are:


   The actor determines the practical goal (rational, specific, and quantifiable) and chooses his means purely in terms of their efficiency to attain the goal. (Please note that in reality there is no pure goal-rational action. But the meaning involved in action tends to be predominantly goal rational).
2. Value-Rational Action (Wertrational action):

Value-rational action is the one where the means are chosen for their efficiency but the goals are determined by value. The action of a captain who goes down with the sinking ship or that of a soldier who allows himself to be killed rather than yield in a war are examples of such action.

3. Affective or Emotional Action:

In certain situations the sole meaning involved in people’s behaviour is to give expression of their emotional state. Here emotion or impulse determines the ends and means of action. Such an action is termed as affective or emotional action. For example, the case of a mother who hugs her child, embracing an old friend, etc.

4. Traditional Action:

Traditional actions are those where both ends and means are determined by custom. Here, the meaning involved is that of maintaining a continuity of the tradition. Rituals, ceremonies and practices of tradition fall in this category.
After having discussed Weber’s perspective and subject matter, let us now move on to his methodology. As stated earlier, the aim of sociology, according to Weber, is different from those of natural sciences. Natural sciences are primarily interested in search for the underlying patterns or laws governing the physical matter. Sociology, on the other hand, seeks to understand social behaviour in terms of meanings and motives, though sociology also attempts to arrive at limited generalizations. Therefore, social sciences cannot rely on positive science methods alone. According to Weber, since the cognitive aim of sociology is to understand human behaviour, therefore, a sociological explanation should be adequate both at the level of meanings as well as at the level of causality. Therefore Weber suggests Verstehen method for sociological enquiry. This expression is taken from Dilthey, but Weber used it in a somewhat different sense. The Verstehen approach is usually translated as ‘interpretive understanding’.

According to Weber, the Verstehen method involves the interpretive understanding of social action through empathetic liaison in order to build a sequence of motives to trace the course and effect of social action. In other words, this method seeks to understand social action at the ‘level of meanings’ and then tries to build a sequence of motives which underlie the social action. Thus a sociological explanation becomes adequate both at the level of meanings as well as at the level of causality.

According to Weber, the Verstehen method involves two steps:

1. Direct observational understanding

2. Explanatory understanding

The first step involved in the Verstehen method is ‘direct observational understanding’ of the obvious subjective meanings of actor’s behaviour. At this stage, the social scientist looks at the social phenomenon from outside and attributes natural meanings to what he observes. Direct observational understanding is obtained directly, either because one knows the rules for a certain behavior (in church, for example) or by empathy when someone expresses his feelings. We understand most every day events in this intuitive manner. For example, through direct observation, we can know the meanings of an obviously hungry man or a man aiming a gun at an animal. We can grasp these meanings because we are aware of the subjective intentions which we attach to our like actions.

Second step involves, establishing an empathetic liaison with the actor. Here, the observer identifies himself with the actor by imaginatively placing himself in the actor’s situation and then tries to interpret the likely meanings which
the actor might have had given to the situation and the consequent motives which would have given rise to the action. We gain an explanatory understanding when we know the motives behind a person’s actions. In this case, the action is explained precisely by the intent behind it: what the person wanted to achieve with the action. It is this type of explanatory understanding that science should work with, according to Weber. In order to trace the course and effect of social action, the sociologists should try to build a sequence of motives linking one with the other and finally linking them to the effect or consequences of social action. Weber wanted the interpretation of social action to be adequate both at the level of meanings as well as at the level of causality. An interpretation of a sequence of events is causally adequate, if careful observations lead to the generalization that it is probable that the sequence will always occur in the same way. Such a generalization should be derived statistically, as far as possible.

Illustration – Describing Social Action

How might we go about studying a person riding a bicycle? Adopting the techniques of a natural scientist we can measure how fast he is going, in what direction, how often he changed gear. We can say how tall or heavy he is, what the conditions are like and what kinds of materials the bike is made from. What we cannot determine just by looking at the cyclist, however, is why he is cycling. For this we need to adopt the approach of the social scientist, going beyond bare description in order to develop theories of action and motivation. Is the cyclist peddling quickly because he is late for a lecture in social theory or because he is trying to improve his fitness? Is he getting pleasure from cycling voluntarily, or is he having to do so because somebody has stolen his car? The full picture of cycling requires more than observation; it also requires interpretation.

However, according to some sociologists, it is not clear as to what Weber really meant when he wished to reconcile the interpretation of action by the Verstehen with the causal explanation. Interpreters of Weber have variously suggested that Verstehen merely generates causal hypotheses of meanings that can function as causes. The use of Verstehen has been criticized severely on the ground that there is no way of validating Verstehen interpretations. However, the advantage of Verstehen lies in the fact that it can be applied with equal ease to study contemporary social phenomena as well as to study the past historical phenomena. As Weber states, ‘One does not have to be a Caesar to know Caesar’.

According to Weber, social and historical reality consists of manifold actions and interests. When the investigator studies this “chaos of facts” he does so from certain points of view. The statement of the problem and the selection of facts the researcher makes are always related, consciously or unconsciously, to “cultural
values.” He studies what is important for him to study. Thus, according to Weber, there can never be any objective scientific analysis of cultural life, since the investigator always ascribes cultural significance to the phenomena he studies. Attempts to write an objective history are also based on certain cultural values. The problem, then, is that this also opens the door for various other kinds of value judgments.

While social science is value-relevant, it must also be value-neutral, according to Weber. Science can speak only of facts, never of values. Weber strongly stresses that there is a fundamental difference between “existential knowledge,” that is, knowledge of what “is,” and “normative knowledge,” that is, what “should be”. Every person has his values and the choice of these values is always subjective. Consequently, science can never state an opinion on “true” values, but must rather limit itself to analyzing the effects of various actions. But it can never say what action should be chosen. There is always an insurmountable chasm between empirical knowledge and value judgments. This difference between “is” and “ought” must prevent the scientist from using his prestige and knowledge to assert his own values at the expense of others.

To solve the problem of the relationship of science to values and the value-neutrality of science, Weber developed his ideal-type methodology. Further, Weber states that social reality by its very nature is infinitely complex and cannot be comprehended in its totality by the human mind. Therefore, selectivity is unavoidable and in order to exercise selectivity sociologists should build “ideal types”. This also implies that Verstehen cannot be applied directly to social reality. The social scientist must first build the ideal type and then apply Verstehen method to the ideal type.

Although social theorists are always faced with the dilemma that there is a reality gap between the ideas and concepts they use and the really real world ‘out there’, which they hope to explain by using them, Weber suggested that this could sometimes be turned into an advantage. Given that we are free to make up whatever concepts we like, it might be useful for social theorists to develop concepts that represent the purest form, or ‘ideal type’, of a particular phenomenon. Although there is no expectation that any particular instance of that phenomenon can match the ideal type, it nonetheless provides a useful intellectual tool for thinking about what the most essential or typical characteristics of a particular event or action might be. For example, in making sociological comparisons between different types of family in a particular society it can be useful to refer to different general types of family rather than attempting the impossible task of describing each and every family individually. Sociologists have developed the ideal-typical descriptions of ‘nuclear family’ and ‘extended family’
as part of their methodology. Ideal types provide a way of conceptualising differences even if the ideal type is never observed in its pure form. Weber uses the technique of ideal type in his own analysis of social action, religious ideology, and authority, in particular, bureaucracy.

An ideal type is a mental construct – a mental picture – that the investigator uses to approach the complex reality. The ideal type has nothing to do with “ideals,” but is ideal only in a purely logical sense. The investigator can create ideal types of anything and none of them assesses any value. The ideal type is an instrument for the investigator to use as he attempts to capture the manifold nature of reality, and its utility lies in its “success in revealing concrete phenomena in their interdependence, their causal conditions and their significance”. The investigator arrives at the ideal type through “the one-sided accentuation of one or more point of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct”.

An ideal type is an analytical construct that serves the investigator as a measuring rod to ascertain similarities as well as deviations in concrete cases. It is neither a statistical average nor an hypothesis; rather it is a mental construct, an organization of intelligible relations within a historical entity, formed by exaggerating certain essential features of a given phenomenon so that no one case of that phenomenon corresponds exactly to the constructed type but every case of that phenomenon falls within the definitional framework. Thus an ideal type is never an accurate representation of the real thing. For example, as constructed by Weber, the ideal type of capitalism did not fully describe any of the various types of capitalism - mercantile capitalism, entrepreneurial capitalism (characteristic of the 18th and 19th century), matured industrial capitalism, etc. From the point of view of his study only some of the features of early entrepreneurial capitalism were relevant which depicted the spirit of capitalism. Therefore Weber isolated these elements and ideally represented these elements alone. Now these elements were not necessarily present in the later forms of capitalism, especially in mature industrial capitalism and finance capitalism. Thus ideal types do not and cannot mirror the reality faithfully.

The ideal type as Weber understood it had nothing to do with moral ideal, for the type of perfection implied in the ideal is purely a logical one and not to be found in pure form in any socio-historical situation. Any social phenomenon has an ideal type, be it a brothel, a house of worship or a market place. For Weber, an ideal type is strictly a “methodological device”. The ideal type is a rational grid for logical observation and analysis. In other words, an ideal type is a rational construction for the purpose of research.
Weber uses his ideal-type methodology in part to reject the idea that science can capture reality “as it is objectively.” As a Neo-Kantian, Weber believed that concepts (ideal types) are always creations of human reason that never have a counterpart in reality. This also applies to the “laws” investigators believe they find in social reality. For example, when Weber discusses Marx he says the laws Marx and the Marxists thought they had found in history and in bourgeois society were actually nothing but ideal types. As ideal types, they have a very important significance if they are used in a comparison with reality, but according to Weber they are actually dangerous if we believe they are empirically valid or express actual forces in reality.

Ideal type is a one-sided view of social reality which takes into account certain aspects of social life while ignoring others. Which aspects are to be given importance to, and which are to be ignored depends upon the object of study. Thus, an ideal type is a way of exercising selectivity.

Ideal type formulation also helps in the developing the classificatory typology of the social phenomenon, thus facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the infinite social reality. For example, Weber developed classificatory typologies of social action, religious ideology and authority.

Ideal type can also help in establishing logical interconnections between different social constellations. For example, Weber in his work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, builds ideal types of the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism and establishes the relationship between the two.

Ideal type also serves the investigator as a measuring rod to ascertain similarities as well as deviations in concrete cases, thus helpful in comparison with reality.

Ideal type also has a limited utility as a source of prediction. As discussed earlier, Weber argues that the laws Marx and the Marxists thought they had found in history and in bourgeois society were actually nothing but ideal types. As ideal types, they have a very important significance if they are used in a comparison with reality.

Further, although ideal type is rooted in reality, it does not represent reality in totality. It is a mental construct. Weber claims that ideal type is a social science equivalent of experimentation in physical and natural sciences. Experimentation is an essential element of scientific method to check the validity and reliability of the research findings in natural sciences. Since due to moral and ethical reasons experimentation is not possible in social sciences which are involved in the study of human behaviour, ideal type can serve as an equivalent of
experimentation in social sciences. As experimentation is conducted under the controlled conditions, likewise an ideal type is also a rational construction based on selectivity.

Thus, according to Weber, the methodology of sociology consists in building ideal types of social behaviour and applying Verstehen method to explain this. Weber’s thesis on “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” is a very good example of the application of this methodology. Besides contributing directly to the development of sociology by suggesting the ‘Verstehen’ approach and ‘ideal types’, Weber’s general conception of the nature of social reality influenced the emergence of other approaches in sociology. For example, we can trace the origins of symbolic interactionism to Max Weber’s argument that people act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their social world. But it was George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), a U.S. philosopher, who introduced symbolic interactionism to sociology in the 1920s. Similarly, ethnomethodologists draw heavily on the European tradition of phenomenological philosophy and in particular acknowledge a debt to the ideas of the philosopher–sociologist Alfred Schutz (1899-1959). Alfred Schutz, a German Social Philosopher was inspired by the ideas of Max Weber. He contributed to the rise of phenomenological approach which in turn gave rise to ethnomethodological approach in sociology.

Another important element of Weber’s methodology is causal pluralism. According to Weber, the social reality is extremely complex and therefore no social phenomena can be explained adequately in terms of a single cause. An adequate sociological explanation must therefore be based on the principle of causal pluralism.

Weber also stresses on the value-neutrality of social science methodology. He argues that since social science deals with phenomena that are value-laden, the researcher, both in choosing what to study and in reporting his findings, has to be aware of his own value and of the value-content of the phenomenon she is researching. Beginning with the problem of choice, for Weber, and again following Rickert, all observations, whether as part of a deductive or of an inductive procedure, is necessarily preceded by a judgement on the part of the observer about what is worth observing. Scientific knowledge, therefore, does not come about in an orderly fashion and following some carefully planned strategy that all the scientists in the world agree upon, but is a much more haphazard affair that reflects subjective judgements made by members or the scientific community. What we know is essentially a product of what we want to find out. Weber takes this line of reasoning a little further and argues that since it is impossible to grasp every tiny detail about a particular phenomenon, social scientists also have to be very selective when making more immediate decisions about which aspects of a
phenomenon to study and in how much detail. Social- scientific knowledge can in fact only even be partial and selective.

Further, looking at value-neutrality in terms or how the observer handles the value-content of the research, Weber notes that values are not objective material entities and cannot be assessed, measured or compared in an entirely logical and dispassionate way. Adopting a rationalist approach to things, since knowledge is actually only a representation of some phenomenon or other in the mind, this representation is always arbitrary. The thing itself is not identical with the idea one has about it. Although conceptual arbitrariness is not so much of a problems when conducting experiments among things that have known and invariable properties, it makes quite a big difference when idea, values and beliefs are the objects of the analysis. The social researcher cannot disregard his own value, nor can he avoid studying values as they present themselves as social phenomena and as the motivators of social action. Being aware of the value-content of social-scientific methodology and of the subject matter itself, what the social research must strive to do is remain neutral in respect of the values that are in play. Social-scientific research fails and social-scientific knowledge is critically undermined if social researchers fail to keep their opinions to themselves. Social-theoretical knowledge, then, is the product of subjective judgement, is partial and selective, and, in at least some respects, arbitrary.

To summarize, according to Weber, while social science is value-relevant, it must also be value-neutral. Weber admitted that at the level of technical competence values are unavoidable, for example, the very choice of the topic of research is influence by the values of the researcher. However still, the researcher must try to check his ideological assumptions from influencing his research. Further, the researcher should not pass any value judgements on the finding of his research. In other words, the researcher should remain indifferent to the moral implications of his research. Further, in order to ensure objectivity and value-neutrality in sociological research, Weber suggested that the researcher should make his value-preference clear in the research monograph. In other words, the researcher should be value-frank.
Weber’s account of the rise of modern, rational, capitalist society: ‘rationality’, *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* and bureaucracy

As we noted in the introduction, it has become standard procedure in learning about social theory to compare Weber’s explanation of the emergence of modern industrial capitalist society with Marx’s account. We have to be interested in this comparison because the question of the causes and consequences of historical development remains a central part of the subject matter of social theory. Notwithstanding the fact, as already noted, that Weber was only familiar with a portion of Marx’s work and was undoubtedly influenced by the simplified German Social Democratic Party reading of Marx, there were very few modern accounts to choose between and certainly Marx’s historical-materialist analysis was a leading contender. Weber was, however, unhappy about the historical-materialist account for a number of reasons. A number of necessarily simplistic comparisons can be made.

First, Weber thought that it was highly unlikely that history develops according to any kind of grand plan, let alone the one that Marx describes. For Weber, human action is much more contingent than this in the sense that nobody can predict what all the circumstances and contexts of action will be. If you cannot specify the context, then there is little chance of foreseeing the action that will take place within it. The basic inability to specify what will happen next also applies to the consequences of action, many of which are quite unintended. Just because social actors hope that things will turn out in one way rather than another does not guarantee that they will. Regarding Marx’s idea, for example, that capitalism must follow feudalism, Weber pointed out that capitalism is not in fact unique to modern society. Much of his historical analysis is concerned with showing that different forms of capitalistic or profit-making behaviour have characterised earlier forms of society. Modern industrial capitalism, in other words, is just one type, one variety of the different kinds of capitalism that, under different historical circumstances, could have developed. Weber is therefore inclined to be cautious about the contribution to social theory of the historical-materialist method.

A second weakness of the historical-materialist approach, as Weber saw it, was that it gave too much attention to the economic realm and thus underestimated what goes on in other aspects of social life. In trying to understand the origins of modern capitalism it is necessary to look at developments in the political, legal and religious spheres as well as in the economic sphere. Rather than accepting Marx’s topographical representation of society as a pyramid with the broad economic base providing a foundation for all other superstructural phenomena, Weber is more inclined to see society as a series of overlapping realms, none of which has the power to control or dominate all of the others. He accepts the very great
significance and influence of the economic sphere but does not see this as causative of all other phenomena in the way that Marx does.

A related weakness, according to Weber at least, is that while materialist theories inevitably give priority to material phenomena, ideational phenomena, including ideas, values and beliefs, but also the way social actors construct intellectual representations of reality in their minds, also need to be taken into account. One could press this point and suggest that at the point ideas become realised through practice, they also take on a material existence.

Having made these criticisms of the historical-materialist approach, Weber felt compelled to offer an alternative. After all, history had to develop in one way or another, and just because historical materialism fell short in its explanation this did not mean that other social theorists should not give it a try.

We will look at Weber’s alternative under three headings:

- his comments about the development of a new kind of **rationality**, which became integral to the Western world view from the 16th century onwards;

- his detailed description in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* of how new variant of the business or commercial spirit of capitalism coincided with the emergence of a particular kind of Protestant religious ethic in Northern Europe at around the same time;

- his comments about the inevitable spread of **bureaucracy**.

**Rationality**

Weber agreed with Marx that modern capitalism had become the dominant characteristic of modern industrial society. It was (and in fact still is) not possible to think of modern society without also thinking about the capitalist business enterprise that lies at the heat if it. Where he disagreed with Marx was over the explanation of how this state of affairs had come about. For Weber the originating cause, the fundamental root of this development, was not ‘men making history’ or ‘the class struggle’ but the emergence of a new approach to life based around a new kind of **rational** outlook. Thus new rationality had its roots in the various intellectual currents that emerged during the European Enlightenment.
The main intention of the new rationality was to replace vagueness and speculation with precision and calculation. This was a profoundly practical kind of rationality in which social actors no longer behaved spontaneously or emotionally but only after making a careful consideration of the various alternatives available to them. The new rationality took the Enlightenment idea that people could control their own destiny and turned it into a strategy for action. It was all about controlling the outcomes of action, of eliminating fate and chance, through the application of reason. Weber called the new outlook instrumental rationality because it took the degree to which it enabled social actors to achieve the ends they had identified as its main criteria for judging whether an action was or was not rational. A characteristic of modern society is that actions are defined as rational as long as they are effective in achieving particular ends. The new instrumental rationality was also a ‘universal rationality’ in the sense that it affected the way in which decisions to act were made, not just in economic affairs, but across the full spectrum of activity. Weber argued that instrumental rationality had become a foundation for a new and highly rationalistic way of life or world view.

Rationalisation

In the same way that the term industrialisation describes what happens when economies take on industrial techniques, Weber used the term rationalisation to describe what happens when the different institutions and practices that surround social action take on the techniques of instrumental rationality. Modern society is modern because it has undergone this process of rationalisation. Although, as we have already noted, Weber agreed with Marx about the great significance for historical development of developments in the economic sphere, he argued that the massive expansion of the economic sphere as it entered its industrial stage was itself a consequence and not a cause of the spread of the new instrumental rationality. Weber noted, for example, that instrumental rationality was not confined to the economic sphere but also affected the development of democratic systems for electing governments, the rationalisation of government into different departments and the increasing use of bureaucracy as the most instrumentally rational way of organising complex organisations. The legal and medical professions, universities and research institutions and so on, are all similarly drawn under the influence of instrumental rationality. The uptake of instrumental rationality through rationalisation can be seen to be a driving force behind all forms of modernisation in modern society.

While factors identified by Marx, such as property relations, class conflict and developments in the means of production, clearly play an important part in how, at a lower and more descriptive level of analysis, the specific
consequences are worked out, each of these is, according to Weber, an outlet for the underlying urge to become increasingly rational. Recalling Durkheim’s analysis of social solidarity and the new individualism, one might say that the instrumental rationality identified by Weber provides an important source of collective consciousness in modern society. Rationalisation and its consequences regulate the behaviour of social actors and thus contribute to social order.

Formal and substantive rationality

Before moving on to look at two detailed examples Weber provides of the actual impact of rationalisation on real situations (the capitalist business enterprise and the rise of bureaucracy), we should pause to make one further point about the new instrumental rationality. As ever, this requires some preliminary philosophical reflection on the qualitative dimensions of instrumental rationality. This concerns the distinction between formal rationality and substantive rationality. There is a tendency to assume that in describing the new instrumental rationality Weber somehow approves of it and of its effects on social life. This is partly unavoidable precisely because Weber goes to great lengths not to offer his own opinion (he would regard this as a serious transgression of the principle of value-neutrality discussed earlier). Nor does he wish to offer any suggestions about how things could be organised differently (although he is generally critical of the socialist alternative as he thinks the mode of bureaucratised social organisation it envisages would restrict individual freedom).

He does, however, make an important distinction between the rationality of something in terms of how useful it is in a purely practical sense (its formal rationality), and how rational it is in terms of the ends it serves (its substantive rationality). For example, it is clear the industrial division of labour is a more technically efficient, a more rational way of producing things than feudal agriculture. What is less clear is whether the decision to apply this type of organisation is an entirely rational one given that there is no guarantee that the general quality of life is also bound to improve. Just because social actors make sensible choices between the various techniques for doing something this does not necessarily help us decide if the ends they want to achieve are, in a more substantive sense, also rational. The atomic bomb is the most effective means of mass destruction but mass destruction is hardly a rational objective.

This dilemma runs parallel to the issue of value-neutrality discussed in the previous section. For Weber, one of the most difficult challenges of social theory is to account for the judgements social actors make, not so much over
the best means for achieving something, but over which ends they feel are worth pursuing. The potential conflict between formal and substantive rationality is itself a consequence of the modernist perspective that emerged from the European Enlightenment. In pre-modernity crucial decisions about ultimate ends simply did not arise because the originating force in the universe was taken to be either nature or God. Having displaced nature with society and having marginalised the notion of the divine presence with the introduction of a strong concept of human self-determination, social actors in modern society have to make choices without reference to supra-human forces; choices that have been created by the powerful new technical means at their disposal.

It was the apparently indissoluble nature of these tensions between the formal and substantive rationalities of modern society, and between the rationalities of the different spheres of social action, that caused Weber to be extremely pessimistic about what the future might hold. If bureaucratic procedures cause a loss of liberty, or if, as Marx showed, the division of labour in industry cause alienation, would it be better not to use these techniques? Most fundamentally, and reflecting the instrumentality of the new outlook, Weber felt that as social actors become more and more obsessed with expressing formal rationality by improving the techniques they have for doing things, they become less and less interested in why they are doing them. The connection between means and ends becomes increasingly weakened even to the extent that ends come to be defined in terms of the unquestioned desirability of developing yet more means.

The ways in which these underlying tensions in the concept of instrumental rationality played themselves out in society provided Weber with a powerful way of theorising the sources of social conflict. Whereas Marx had correctly defined social conflict in terms of the struggle for economic resources, Weber added that important struggles also took place between one value system and another. The resources, in other words, over which social actors come into conflict, are not just economic ones but ideational and conceptual one as well. Capitalism dominated modern society not just because it is red hot at developing new techniques for producing things (it expresses very high levels of formal rationality, or in Marx’s terms is very dynamic in developing the means of production), but because it engages sufficiently at the level of ideas for social actors to believe that this is a rational way to proceed.

The rational iron cage

Weber regrets the loss of high ideals and of meaning in existence that resulted from rationalization. The paradox and tragedy of our time is that rationalization has taught people to master nature, to develop technology for
producing the means of survival, and to create administrative bureaucratic systems for regulating social life, while the existential basis of life – the choice of values and ideals and the search for meaning beyond soulless calculation of effective means for achieving a certain goal – is disappearing more and more. Modern man is trapped in a rational “iron cage of commodities and regulations” and he has lost his humanity. At the same time, he believes he has achieved the highest stage of development.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Dropping down a level from Weber’s more abstract development of the concept of rationality to describe the general causes of the process by which modern society develops, we can look at two examples of how Weber thought these principles worked themselves out in practice. The first is his influential description in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (otherwise known as ‘the Protestant ethic thesis’) of how a particular set of business interests coincided with a specific religious orientation to produce the modern rational variant of capitalism (the second is his critical analysis of bureaucracy, which we will be looking at shortly). Along with his influential contribution to methodological issues in the social sciences, and of his analysis of rationality and social action, Weber’s reputation as a major social theorist rest heavily on the two extended essays he published under this title in 1904 and 1905. In them, and drawing on the ideas and argument as we have just been looking at, he offers his description of the origins of modern capitalism:

In the last analysis the factor which produces capitalism is the rational permanent enterprise with its rational accounting, rational technology and rational law, [complemented by] the rational spirit, the rationalisation of the conduct of life in general and a rationalistic economic ethic.

Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

This brief quotation usefully summarises Weber’s analysis of what is peculiar about modern capitalism. In contrast to earlier forms of profit making, the modern form is profoundly rational in the sense that its advocates try to keep risks to a minimum, behave in a highly calculating way when making business and investment decisions, and, perhaps most essentially, continue to make profits even when they have already passed the point of satisfying their own immediate needs. Reflecting the problematic nature of instrumental rationality as discussed in the previous section, profit making within modern capitalism becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Recalling Marx’s description, this amounts to a shift from the production of commodities that are valuable because of their practical use
[or use value], to the production of commodities whose value lies in their abstract capacity for exchangeability [exchange value]. The production of use values is limited by the needs they satisfy, whereas the production of exchange values is unlimited.

In his sociology of religion, Weber used his ideal types to try to answer his fundamental question: Why was it in Europe that capitalism had its breakthrough and later became a dominant force in the world? This question cannot be answered as the Marxists did, simply by pointing to the initial accumulation of capital and the creation of a “free” class of wage laborers. Even though these institutional factors were important to the origin of capitalism, they do not explain why certain people in history began to act in a capitalist manner. According to Weber, Marxian view on the development of capitalism can at best be regarded as an ideal type construction highlighting the role of economic factor which contributed to the rise of capitalism.

Weber also rejected Engel’s view that Protestantism rose in Europe as a legitimizing ideology to nascent capitalism which had already come into existence. Instead he emphasized the role of ideas as an independent source of change. Refuting Engel’s argument he further states that capitalism existed in an embryo in Babylon, Roman, Chinese and Indian societies and in China and India other material conditions propitious for the development of capitalism also existed at certain stages in their history. But nowhere did it led to the development of modern capitalism. This phenomenon is peculiar to western society alone. The question arises as to why these embryos developed into the modern form of capitalism only in the west and nowhere else. An explanation in terms of the internal dynamics of economic forces alone is unable to account for this peculiarity. It is necessary to take into account specific ethos of the early European capitalistic entrepreneurs and realize that this was precisely what was absent in other civilizations.

After all, according to Weber, any explanation of a historical phenomenon must be traced back to human social action and, thus, the investigator must try to gain an explanatory understanding of why certain people acted as they did, based on those people’s own conditions. It was this that Weber attempted to do in his famous study on the connection between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

Early capitalism emerged in a part of Europe that had also undergone a religious reformation. What meaningful link was there between Protestantism and the appearance of capitalism?
Weber created two ideal types, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, to examine this question.

In his ideal type on the Protestant ethic, Weber dwells on the values and beliefs that arose within a particularly vigorous and ascetic variety of the Protestant faith, which developed in Northern Europe, and later in North America, during the 16th and 17th centuries. ‘Asceticism’ is an attitude of self-restraint, even self-denial, which imposes strict limits on the kind of enjoyment a person may take in the products of his or her work. For Weber, it was the historically fortunate coming together of this religious code of conduct or ‘ethic’, and the ‘spirit’ of the newly emerging and instrumentally oriented variety of capitalism, that launched rational capitalism into the modern world.

Weber argues that the originality of this new ascetic Protestantism lay not so much in ideas about living a good earthly life and having faith in the possibility of spiritual salvation, principles that had been around for quite a while already, but in the self-administered and thus psychological nature of the fear of not achieving spiritual salvation. Central to the Protestant faith is the idea that it is the individual and not the Church who carries responsibility for spiritual destiny (individual responsibility). The concept of individual conscience and individual responsibility was built around the idea of ‘the calling’ developed by the initiator of the Protestant faith, the German theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546). As Weber interprets it; ‘The only way of living acceptably to God was through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling’.

This key principle was supplemented soon after by the idea of ‘predestination’, put forward in the teaching of another Protestant theologian John Calvin (1509-64). Calvin in his doctrine of predestination argued that God, in his omnipotence, has determined the fate of every man long before that man is born. Thus God has decided which people will gain salvation and which are condemned to eternal damnation. Those who had not been chosen were destined never to achieve spiritual salvation. At first sight this position seems paradoxical. If spiritual salvation has been settled in advance then what is to be gained from pursuing earthly toil in a godly manner, why not simply lead a life of pleasure and idleness?

Calvin emphasised, however, that precisely since there can be no certainty of salvation individuals must prove their spiritual salvation by leading an exemplary life on earth. Moreover, this proof could not simply be demonstrated abstractly by believing in the possibility of salvation hereafter, but through concrete action in the present. Intense worldly activity thus became indispensable ‘as a sign of election’:
‘[It is] the technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation’. Through frenetic devotion to one’s calling, the individual is provided with a means of demonstrating how certain they are about being saved. Conveniently, ‘the earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling’. Ascetic Protestantism thus unequivocally ties spiritual destiny to profoundly practical and energetic ethic of hard work.

Weber constructs the other ideal type, the spirit of capitalism, on the book Advice to a Young Tradesman written in 1748 by Benjamin Franklin (1706-90). In this book Franklin offers advice to those who would like to succeed in business. He believes they must remember that time is money, that credit is money, and that money, with hard work, can produce more money. This focus on the multiplication of money is also linked to a call for a moral and ascetic life in which those who have provided credit would rather hear the sound of a hammer at five o’clock in the morning than see the borrower at the pool table.

Irrespective of whether salvation is actually achieved through hard work, the practical outcome of the idea that it might gave rise to a work-obsessed class of entrepreneurs and business people whose earthly desire for commercial success ran parallel with their religious desire for spiritual redemption. Since the enjoyment of wealth is considered sinful, the only legitimate use for the increasing revenue is to reinvest it in the business itself. The pragmatic saving of capital is justified by the higher substantive aim of the saving of souls. For Weber, it is this coincidence within the Protestant ethic between obsessive hard work and an ascetic attitude towards the wealth it generates that lies at the heart of the ‘elective affinity’ or sympathetic association between Protestantism and capitalism:

‘When the limitation of consumption is combined with the release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save. The restraints imposed upon the consumption of wealth naturally served to increase it by making possible the productive investment of capital.’

- Max Weber

The hard-working, hard-saving, soul-searching mentality embedded within the Protestant work ethic filtered down the social hierarchy eventually establishing itself as the most practical and legitimate way of achieving prosperity in modern society. Making good use of time, being busy not idle, avoiding frivolity, self-indulgence and wastefulness, are common principles of behaviour that have undoubtedly shaped the mentality of modern Western society.

In summary, then, the argument Weber puts forward in his Protestant ethic thesis tries to provide a multidimensional explanation of how modern capitalism
really got going. The basic point he wants to get across is that although the very large amounts of capital that capitalism needed to get started did, from a technical point of view, come by way of developments in the versatility of the division of labour and the efficiency of the means of production, these developments were themselves a result of a qualitative change in the general approach to life and work; a general approach based on new ideas, values and beliefs. Weber’s explanation can be much more precise about the timing of the whole modern capitalist adventure (Northern Europe in the period 1650-1750), because the release of spare capital is tied to a specific coming together of commercial attitudes and the religious teaching of Luther and Calvin. Unlike the historical-materialist account, which relies on the theoretical construct of developments in the means and relations of production to predict the emergence of capitalism from feudalism, Weber’s thesis gives the whole event a real sense of historical actuality. Modern rational capitalism emerged because of the collision at a particular time and place of a particular set of real but unpredictable circumstances. Some of these circumstances were material ones (technical innovation, new commercial opportunities), but others came from the realm of ideas.

Getting back to Weber’s underlying argument that the whole ethos of modern society changed with the emergence of the new rationality, he felt that what the twin beliefs in saving one’s capital and saving one’s soul had in common was the fact that they both defined rationality in highly instrumental terms. If by working hard it is possible to achieve earthly comfort, and enhance one’s sense of having spiritual future thereafter, then hard work becomes the pivotal activity of one’s life. Hard work is legitimately regarded as having very high levels of formal rationality because it is the practical means of achieving the substantively rational goals of prosperity and salvation. Nobody in the West is ever criticised for working too hard because hard work is the best means of achieving these highest ends.

Weber believes that even though the content of the two cultures, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, were different and based on different assumptions, they lead to similar actions. Protestant action was value-rational action, that is, it attempted, to live up to the value of being saved and to find signs of salvation. Capitalist action is purposive rational action, that is, it attempts to find effective means of achieving an end, the multiplication of money. To the Protestant, the ascetic life and diligence were part of a life lived in the glory of God and were not directed toward the multiplication of money. Despite this, however, it broke with what Weber calls the “feudal spirit,” which contained an irrational use of wealth in the form of a life of luxury. In order for capitalism to rise, this form of the luxurious use of wealth had to give way to an accumulation and reinvestment of accumulated money. The Protestant ethic played a key role in this transition. According to Weber, early modern capitalism was characterized by the
institutionalization of “gain spirit” where the ethical and religious ideas regulated and provided legitimization and justification of the pursuit of economic goals.

Asceticism contributed to a rational moulding of every aspect of life. Constant control through a systematic effort resulted in a rationalization of individual conduct even in the conduct of business. Thus the adherents to the Protestant ideology became adept in rationalizing economic action while leading an austere and ascetic life. This entrepreneurial attitude, hard work, rational organization of conduct and frugal living together constituted the spirit of capitalism, which according to Weber was fostered through the Protestant ethic. To avoid misunderstanding, Weber specified that the causal relationship between Protestantism and capitalism should not be taken in the sense of a mechanical relationship. Due to his belief in causal pluralism, Weber states that the Protestant ethos was some of the sources of rationalization of life which helped to create what is known as the spirit of capitalism. It was not the sole cause, not even a sufficient cause of capitalism. Raymond Aron makes Weber’s position clear when he writes, ‘Protestantism is not the cause but one of the causes of capitalism or rather it is one of the causes of certain aspects of capitalism’.

Thus Weber has clearly stated that only the spirit of capitalism was created by the Protestant ethos. While there were number of other contributory factors which along with the spirit of capitalism helped in the growth of capitalism. Further Weber made a comparative study of world religions in terms of their beliefs and practices and their repercussions on social life. Weber analyzed Confucianism and Taoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, and finally ancient Judaism. He also planned, but was unable to complete, studies on Islam, Talmudic Judaism, early Christianity, and various religious sects within the Reformation. The studies Weber carried out deal with the various social conditions in which the different religions operated, the social stratification, the links of various groups to different religious, and the importance of various religious leaders.

With the help of comparative study he built a typology of religions. He pointed that religious activity can be classified into two categories:

1) Asceticism, and

2) Mysticism

Asceticism consists of the belief that God direct religious activity, so that the believer sees himself to be the instrument of the divine will. Therefore the purpose of this life is not to waste it in luxuries and pleasures of flesh, rather one should lead a disciplined life to realize the glory of God.
Mysticism, on the other hand, consists of a consciousness not so much of being an instrument of God but of what Weber calls a *vassal* of God. Religious activity, in this case, is a question of achieving a condition akin to the divine. This is accomplished by contemplation on truths than those which can be demonstrated in this world.

Next, according to Weber, asceticism can manifest itself in two forms – inner worldly asceticism and other worldly asceticism. Inner worldly asceticism is where individuals not only feel themselves to be the instrument of God’s will, but seek to glorify God’s name through performing good work in the world. Here success in this world itself becomes a sign of divine approval. Other worldly asceticism, on the other hand, is where the individuals renounce the world so that they may be of service to God alone, as in the case of monastic orders.

Here, Weber pointed out that only inner worldly ascetic types of religious beliefs which make the believer treat day to day working as the calling of God will foster the spirit of capitalism. The other worldly asceticism and mysticism will not be conducive to the growth of the spirit of capitalism. Certain sets of Protestantism alone were the inner worldly ascetic type and hence contributed to the rise of modern capitalism. On the other hand, other religions like Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism etc., were either other worldly ascetic or had a preponderance of the mysticism and therefore failed to foster the spirit of capitalism, although material conditions propitious for the development of capitalism were present in Indian and Chinese societies.

Weber did not believe that Protestantism “caused” capitalism or that the early Protestants were cynical money-worshipers (although there were isolated examples of this). Instead, using his fundamental methodology, he attempted to understand acting people so that, on the basis of this knowledge, he could explain historical events. Once capitalism had become established, it no longer needed this value-based foundation as a criterion for action. It was sufficient that purposive rational action had become institutionalized, as it was in the modern capitalist company. But in the transition from precapitalist to capitalist action, some justification was needed for the first capitalist to begin acting in an ascetic and world-oriented manner. According to Weber, the Protestant ethic contributed just this kind of strong force that could make people begin acting differently and not simply on the basis of tradition.

As stated earlier, in addition to analyzing the role of Protestantism in the rise of early capitalism, Weber also worked on a major comparative study of world religions. This study did not deal with the metaphysical “essence” of the various religions, rather Weber analyzed the importance religion had for the “the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action”. Weber was particularly
interested in how various religions hindered or promoted a special sort of economic rationality and, in this sense, the study of world religions was part of Weber’s overall investigation of what specific factors led to the rational capitalism of the Western world.

Weber summarized his results in a brief introduction when his collected studies on religion were published. The fundamental question he asks is “to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value”. As a result of his analysis of the various religions of the world and their respective social conditions, Weber distinguished a number of factors that separated the West from other societies. These factors are:

1 Science. To be sure, empirical knowledge, consideration of the problems of the world and of life, and philosophical and ideological wisdom have developed in other cultures as well, but they lack the systematic development of knowledge based on natural science and experimentation that is found in the West. The West has also developed systematic forms of thought and rational concepts within historical research and law.

2 Art. In music the West has developed a rational harmony-based music with counter-point and chordal harmony, a notation system that allows the composition and performance of modern musical works, and a number of instruments such as the organ, piano, violin, etc. In architecture, only the West has developed a rational use of the Gothic arch to distribute weight to reach over all kinds of rooms. Only in the West has a printing art appeared that is aimed solely at literature.

3 Administration. Although other cultures have also had institutions of higher learning similar on the surface to the Western university, it is only here that there is a rational, systematic, and specialized practice of science by trained experts. This has led to the development of professionally trained organizations of officials and to the fact that the “most important functions of the everyday life of society have come to be in the hands of technically, commercially, and above all legally trained government officials”.

4 The State. Of course, there is a form of “state” in all cultures, but “the State itself, in the sense of a political association with a rational, written constitution, rationally ordained law, and an administration bound to rational rules or laws, administrated by trained officials, is known, in this combination of characteristics, only in the Occident”.

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5 Economics. In all cultures and in all groups there is and has always been a “lust for money” and it is not that distinguishes Western capitalism from the economies of other cultures. Rather, it is the rational bridling of this irrational impulse that makes possible the appearance of a rational capitalism. This capitalism is based on the “expectation of profit by utilization of opportunities for exchange, that is on (formally) peaceful chances of profit”. In addition, it is only here that the specifically capitalist organization of labour has developed with rational calculation, based on a free labour force. Only here has the economy developed a systematic use of technology and, moreover, “modern rational capitalism needs… a calculable legal system and administration in terms of formal rules”.

The final result of this comparative sociology of religion is that the specific nature of Western development is that there is a “specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture”. Thus, according to Weber, the basis of this unique Western development is not to be found in the economy, but in its unique rationalization process. Weber believed inner worldly asceticism to be a crucial factor in the rationalisation of social life. Capitalism is simply an expression of this rationalization, just as the modern state with its administration and armies, bureaucracy, legitimatization of power, science, and art all are. It is the discovery of this rationalization process that is perhaps Weber’s most important contribution to social science. This argument of Weber implies that any religious (or secular) ideology which emphasises on the inner worldly ascetic attitude towards life would lead to rationalisation of social life.

Balwant Nevaskar, in his book, *Capitalist without Capitalism: Jains of India and the Quakers of the West* (1971), states that Max Weber was the first sociologist to have sociologically studied the major religions of India. These studies are contained in his book “The Religion of India” (by Max Weber, the original edition was in German and was published in 1916). Max Weber maintains that the Jains are an exclusive merchant sect and that there is apparently “a positive relationship between Jainism and economic motivation which is otherwise quite foreign in Hinduism”. Weber seems to suggest that although Jainism is spiritualized in the direction of world renunciation, some features of inner worldly asceticism are also present in it. To begin with, it can be observed that the twin doctrines of “predestination” and the “calling” implied in Protestantism are only indirectly present in Jainism but they must be understood in the light of Karma, and not in relation to God. Many aspects of rational conduct promoting savings such as thriftiness, self-discipline, frugality and abstention as part of this worldly asceticism, however, are directly present in Jainism.
In “The Protestant Ethic and the Parsis,” Robert Kennedy does just this and suggests that Zoroastrianism — an ancestral monotheism — set the stage for Modernity, which encompasses not only capitalism but also science. Kennedy identifies five abstract values associated with Modernity: (1) an underlying order in nature, (2) sensory standard of verification, (3) material work is intrinsically good, (4) maximization of material prosperity, and (5) accumulation rather than consumption of material goods. Using historical data on the Parsis or Zoroastrian Persians who fled from Iran to India after the Islamic conquest in the 8th century AD, Kennedy examines their beliefs, culture, and society for correspondences. Finding many, Kennedy suggests that modern economy and science may have roots in Zoroastrian religion.

Similarly, Clifford Geertz carried out his study in East Java, Indonesia, in the early 1950s with an intention to find a local variant of the Protestant ethic in Muslim societies — inspired by Weber’s famous “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.” Please note that the dominance of the Weberian perspective among US scholars in general at the time was one factor. Geertz was a student of Talcott Parsons, and Parsons was the one who introduced Weber to American academia by translating “The Protestant Ethic” into English. But of course Geertz’s choice to use the Weberian perspective was not simply because of this teacher-student relation. The most important reason was because he tried to find the relation between religious ideas and human conduct, politics and economic development — between religion and social change. For this analytical endeavor, Weber provided very useful tools.

Weber study of “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” opened up new vistas of research on the factors contributing to the rise of modern industrial capitalist society in Europe and elsewhere. Please note that Weber emphasized on the role of ideas in shaping the motivations and life styles of future capitalists. For him, it was an independent factor responsible of the rise of capitalism. He did not totally reject Marxian theory of rise of capitalism which sought to explain capitalist development in terms of economic forces. He regarded the Marxist view as an ideal type model highlighting the role of one set of factors i.e. economic factors. Weber advocated that the rise of modern capitalism can be explained only by taking into account the multiplicity of factors at work.

After Weber, a number of scholars have attempted to explain the development of capitalism and in the process have highlighted some new factors which contributed to the growth of modern capitalism. These later day theories of capitalism should be treated as complementary to those of Marx and Weber.
For example, Neil Joseph Smelser, an American sociologist, in his study of third world countries, found that the state played an important role in the rise of capitalism. He argued that nationalistic ideology (secular inner worldly asceticism) in the third world societies has played the same role which protestant ethos did in the case of Europe in the rise of capitalism.

Werner Sombart, a German economist and sociologist, was deeply influenced by the ideas of Marx and Weber. According to Sombart, the development of capitalism can be divided into three stages:

- *Early capitalism*, ending before the industrial revolution;
- *High capitalism*, beginning about 1760; and,
- *Late capitalism*, beginning with World War I.

The moving force during the first stage of capitalism was a small number of enterprising businessmen, emerging from all groups of population – noble men, adventurers, merchants and artisans. Here he also highlighted the importance of the flow of precious metal (Gold, Silver, etc.) into Europe from South America. Sombart, in his book *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, also highlighted the role of Jews in the development of modern capitalism. In addition, he accepted Weber’s views that Protestant ethic emphasized values of hard work while deferring gratification and such an attitude favoured creation of capital and its productive reinvestment rather than consumption.

Another scholar, Andre Gunder Frank (1929–2005), a German-American economic historian and sociologist, who promoted dependency theory after 1970s, has emphasized the role of colonial rule or imperial domination in the development of capitalism among imperial powers. The colonial expansion divided the world into two major zones and created an international division of labour. In such a division, the colonies supplied cheap raw materials to the European imperial powers to feed their manufacturing industries. The manufactured goods were exported back to the colonies which served also as markets. This colonial relationship helped in the rapid capitalist development in the European countries while destroying the handicraft industries of the colonies and suppressing economic growth there.

Weber’s thesis on Protestant ethic and the rise of Spirit of Capitalism has also been criticized on various accounts. Famous English historian R H Tawney has pointed out that the empirical evidence on which Weber’s interpretation of Protestantism was based was too narrow. According to him, England was the first country to develop capitalism. However, the English Puritans did not believe in the doctrine of predestination. However, sympathisers of Weber argue that this criticism is based on the narrow interpretation of his work. They argue that it was
only an ideal type construction which sought to establish a connection between certain aspects of Protestantism with only some aspects of early entrepreneurial type of capitalism. All that Weber was trying to say was that Protestant ethic contributed to the rationalization which preceded modern capitalism. At no stage did Weber claim it to be the sole cause. In fact, Weber did admit to the possibility of building other ideal types linking other contributory factors to capitalism. Thus Weber’s thesis should not be treated as a general theory of capitalism development. It is more ideographic in nature. Further Weber clearly states that the spirit of capitalism was only one component, albeit an important one. There are other components too which together with the spirit constituted the modern capitalism. These components are private ownership of the means of production, technological development such as mechanization or automation, formally free labour, organization of capitalist producers into joint stock companies, a universalistic legal system which applied to everyone and is administered equitably, etc. All these elements together form the basis of the ideal type of modern capitalism.

Critics also point out that modern capitalism is no longer guided by inner worldly asceticism but hedonism. In this regard it can be stated that Weber in his work was only concerned with one dimension of capitalism, that is, the emergence of early capitalism and its link to the protest ethos. Weber had stated in his methodology that since social reality is infinite we can study social reality scientifically only with the help of ideal types. Further, he stressed on the fact given the infinite and dynamic nature of social reality, the researcher should only aim at limited generalizations. As far as the challenges of late capitalism are concerned, Weber did express his concern for the predomination of formal or instrumental rationality at the expense of substantive rationality.
Bureaucracy

Max Weber has defined power as, “the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.” Power is therefore an aspect of social relationships. An individual or group do not hold power in isolation, they hold it in relation to others. Power is therefore power over others.

Depending on the circumstances surrounding its use, sociologists classify power in two categories. When power is used in a way that is generally recognized as socially right and necessary, it is called legitimate power. Power used to control others without the support of social approval is referred to as illegitimate power. Thus from legal point of view, power has been classified into legitimate and illegitimate power. Authority is that form of power which is accepted as legitimate, that is as right and just, and therefore obeyed on that basis. In other words, when the power is legitimized it becomes authority and only then it is accepted by people voluntarily. Coercion is that form of power which is not regarded as legitimate by those subject to it. For example, government agents demanding and receiving sales tax from a shopkeeper are using legitimate power; gangsters demanding and receiving protection money from the same shopkeeper by threat of violence are using illegitimate power.

Thus when power gets institutionalized and comes to be accepted as legitimate by those on whom it is being exercised, it is termed authority. Weber’s study of authority has to be understood in the context of his general typology of social action. As discussed earlier, Weber built various ideal types of social action which are distinguished by the meanings on which they are based. These include traditional action, affective action, and rational action (both goal-rational and value rational).

Max Weber further argues that the nature of authority is shaped by the manner in which the legitimacy is acquired. Thus, Weber identifies three ideal types of authority systems viz., the traditional authority, the charismatic authority and the legal-rational authority.

The traditional authority is the characteristic of those societies where the ‘traditional action’ is predominant. Traditional action is based on established custom. An individual acts in a certain way because of an ingrained habit, because things have always been done that way. In those societies where traditional action is a predominant mode of behaviour, exercise of power is seen as legitimate when it is consonance with the tradition and conforms to the customary rules. Such type of authority was termed by Weber as traditional authority. Weber identified two
forms of traditional authority i.e. patriarchalism and patrimonialism. In patriarchalism, authority is distributed on the basis of gerentocratic principles. Thus the right to exercise authority is vested in the eldest male member. This type of authority is to be found in case of very small scale societies like the Bushmen of Kalahari desert or in case of extended kin groups in agrarian societies like lineage or joint families in India.

When the patriarchal domination has developed by having certain subordinate sons of the patriarch or other dependents take over land and authority from the ruler, Weber calls this patrimonial domination and a patrimonial state can develop from it. In the patrimonial state, such as Egypt under the Pharaohs, ancient China, the Inca state, the Jesuit state in Paraguay, or Russia under the czars, the ruler controls his country like a giant princely estate. The master exercises unlimited power over his subjects, the military force, and the legal system. Patrimonial dominance is a typical example of the traditional exercise of power in which the legitimacy of the ruler and the relationships between him and his subjects are derived from tradition. Patrimonialism is characterized by the existence of hereditary office of a king or a chief and an administrative staff consisting of courtiers and favourites who together form a nascent bureaucracy. The king or the chief exercises absolute and arbitrary power, subject only to customary rules.

Second type of authority is charismatic authority which corresponds to affective action. Charisma refers to a certain quality of an individual’s personality by virtue of which, he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with the supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional power or qualities. These qualities are not accessible to an ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader and is revered. Charismatic type to authority can exist in all types of societies. Charismatic authority gains prominence in the times of crisis where other forms of authority prove inadequate to deal with the situation. Thus heroes who help to win the war or people with the reputation for therapeutic wisdom who come to regarded as saviours in times of epidemics and prophets in times of general moral crisis come to acquire charismatic authority.

Please note that the administrative staff of a charismatic leader does not consist of officials at least its members are not technically trained. It is not chosen to the basis of social privilege nor from the point of view of personal loyalty. It is rather chosen in terms of the charismatic qualities of its members. The prophet has his disciples, the war lord his selected henchmen, the leader generally his followers. There is no such thing as appointment, no career, no promotion. There is only a call at the instance of the leader on the basis of his charismatic qualities. There is no hierarchy, the leader merely intervenes in general or in individual cases.
when he considers the members of his staff inadequate to a task which they have been entrusted with. Often there is no definite sphere of authority and of competence though there may be territorial mission. Also there is no such thing as salary or benefit. Disciplines or followers tend to live primarily in a communal relationship with their leader, means for which have been provided for by voluntary gifts. There is no system of formal rules or legal principles, or judicial process oriented to them.

Charismatic authority lies outside the realism of everyday routine and the profane sphere. In this respect it is sharply opposed, both to rational or bureaucratic authority and to traditional authority. Both bureaucratic and traditional authorities are bound by certain type of rules, while charismatic authority is foreign to all rules. Due to this freedom from established rules, charismatic authority can act as a great revolutionary force.

The charismatic movement, with its charismatic authority, differs on several important points from both traditional organizations and bureaucracies. Charisma is a force that is fundamentally outside everyday life and, whether it be religious or political charisma, it is a revolutionary force in history that is capable of breaking down both traditional and rational patterns of living; but charismatic domination is unstable in nature. The authority of the charismatic leader stems from “the supernatural, superhuman, or, at least, specifically exceptional powers” he possesses, at least in the eyes of his followers. This force lies outside the routines of everyday life, and the problem arises when this extraordinary force is to be incorporated into a routine everyday life. Weber calls this process the “routinization of charisma,” which means that the leader (or if he is dead, his successor) and the followers want to make “it possible to participate in normal family relations or at least to enjoy a secure social position.” When this happens, the charismatic message is changed into dogma, doctrine, regulations, law, or rigid tradition. The charismatic movement develops into either a traditional or a bureaucratic organization, “or a combination of both”.

As stated earlier, charismatic authority is inherently unstable. This is on account of several reasons. Firstly, charismatic authority is the product of a crisis situation and therefore lasts so long as the crisis lasts. Once the crisis is over the charismatic authority has to be adapted to everyday matters. This is called the process of routinization of charisma. Thus charismatic authority may be transformed into either traditional or legal-rational authority. Secondly, one of the decisive motives underlying all cases of routinization of charisma is naturally the striving for security. This means legitimizing on one hand of the position of authority and on the other hand of the economic advantages enjoyed by the followers of the leader. Thirdly, another important motive, however, lies in the objective necessity of adaptation of the patterns of order, of the organization, and
of the administrative staff to the normal, everyday needs and conditions of carrying on the administration. Finally, there is the problem of succession which renders charismatic authority unstable since basis of authority is the personal charisma of the leader. It is not easy to find a successor who also possesses those charismatic qualities. Thus in charismatic authority, discontinuity is inevitable. One of the solutions to the problem of discontinuity is to transform the charisma of the individual into the charisma of the office which can be translated to every incumbent of the office by ritual means. Most important example is the transmission of the charisma of a royal authority by anointing and by coronation. This ideal type of charismatic authority is extremely helpful in the study of radical transformation of traditional societies like Russia, China, India, Egypt and other Third World countries. All these societies had charismatic leaders to meet the crisis of transition. Thus you can understand the significance and nature of the authority exercised by Gandhi in India, Lenin in Russia, Mao in China and Nasser in Egypt.

The third ideal type of authority, which corresponds to rational action, is legal-rational authority or bureaucracy. Having begun to define modern society in terms of the spread of instrumental rationality, Weber goes on to argue that as society becomes more and more complex (both in terms of its economics arrangements, and in terms of its increasing institutional sophistication), the quest for an appropriately rational means of organisation also becomes increasingly urgent. Since the most rational means of organisation is bureaucratic organisation, he felt it was inevitable that bureaucracy would become an ever more dominant feature of modern society. The importance of this development for Weber’s social theory is that bureaucracy provides a fine example of a technique of formal rationality that is found in all spheres of social life. In fact, whether in the economy or in the legislative and administrative functions of the state, progress comes to depend on the availability of bureaucratic means of organisation and administration.

In other words, according to Weber, all societies are gradually moving away from traditional type of authority to legal-rational type of authority. Europe was the first to experience this transformation. But, Weber regarded those processes as inevitable in all societies advancing towards industrial civilization. In industrial societies, rational action becomes the most predominant form of social behaviour. Weber has termed this process of increasing preponderance of rational action as rationalization. With increasing rationalization, legal-rational authority becomes the most common form of authority system.

Legal-rational authority differs sharply from its charismatic and traditional counterparts. Legitimacy and control stem neither from the perceived personal qualities of the leader and the devotion they exercise, nor from a commitment to traditional wisdom. Authority is based on the acceptance of a set of impersonal
rules. Those who possess authority are able to issue commands and have them obeyed because other accepts the legal framework which supports their authority. Thus a judge, a tax inspector or military commander are obeyed not on the basis of tradition or as a result of their charisma but because of the acceptance of legal statuses and rules which grant them authority and define the limits of that authority. These rules are rational in the sense that they are consciously constructed for the attainment of a particular goal and they specify the means by which that goal is to be attained. As Weber’s view of rational action suggested, precise calculation and systematic assessment of the various means of attaining a goal are involved in the construction of rules form the basis of legal-rational authority.

Like other forms of authority, legal-rational authority produces a particular kind of organizational structure – the bureaucracy. Weber defined bureaucracy as, “a hierarchical organization designed rationally to coordinate work of many individuals in the pursuit of large-scale administrative tasks and organizational goals. Weber constructed an ideal type of the rational-legal bureaucratic organization. He argued that bureaucracies in modern industrial societies are steadily moving towards his pure type.

The main characteristics of the ideal-type bureaucracy as envisaged by Weber can be summarised as follows:

- **Bureaucracy is an expert system of administration based on detailed documentation and record-keeping.** The regular activities required for the purposes of the organizations are distributed in a fixed way as **official duties**. Each administrative official has a clearly defined area of competence and responsibility.
- **Bureaucracies have a rigidly hierarchical organisational structure** with clear lines of communication and responsibility.
- **The operation of bureaucracy is governed by a legalistic framework** of formal rules and regulations.
- **Decisions are made through the application of specific procedures designed to eliminate subjective judgements.** The legitimacy of bureaucracy and of bureaucrats is based on a strict separation of individual personality from the task being done. The ideal official performs his duties in a spirit of formalistic impersonality, without hatred or passion. The activities of a bureaucrat are governed by the rules, not by personal consideration such as his feeling towards colleagues or clients. His actions are therefore rational rather than affective. Business is conducted according to calculable rules and without regard for persons.
- **Authority is a characteristic of the post not of the post holder.**
It is not possible to become a bureaucrat without the correct formal qualifications and credentials. Officials are appointed on the basis of **technical knowledge** and **expertise**. Weber states, “Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. This is the feature which makes it specifically rational.” Thus officials are selected in terms of the contribution their particular knowledge and skills can make to the realization of organizational goals. Once appointed, the official is full time paid employee and his occupation constitutes a career. Promotion being based on seniority or achievement or a combination of both.

Finally, bureaucratic administration involves a **strict separation between private and official incomes**. The official does not own any part of the organization for which he works nor can he use his position for private gain. In Weber’s words, bureaucracy segregates official activity as something distinct from the sphere of private life.

The ideal type is most closely approximated in capitalist industrial society where it becomes the major form of organization control. The development of bureaucracy is due to its ‘technical superiority’ compared to organizations based on charismatic and traditional authority. In Weber’s words, “the decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organisation”. This superiority stems from the combination of specialist skills being subordinated to the goals of the organization. It drives from the exclusion of personal emotions and interests which might detract from the attainment of those goals. It results from a set of rational rules designed explicitly to further the objectives of the organization. Compared to other forms of organizations, tasks in a bureaucracy are performed with greater precision and speed, with less friction and lower costs.

Although Weber appreciated the technical advantages of bureaucratic organization, he was also aware of its disadvantages. He saw the strict control of human freedom and the uniform and rational procedures of bureaucratic practice as preventing spontaneity, creativity and individual initiative. The impersonality of official conduct tends to produce specialists without spirit. Weber foresaw the possibility of men trapped in their specialized routines with little awareness of the relationship between their jobs and the organization as a whole. Weber saw the danger of bureaucrats becoming preoccupied with uniformity and order, of losing sight of all else, becoming dependent on the security provided by their highly structured niche in the bureaucratic machine.

Even the level of formal rationality, however, Weber felt problems were likely to arise because few bureaucracies ever match up to the ideal type. The substance of many decisions is likely to be based on subjective judgement, even if
the process is intended to prevent this. Sometimes rule-governed procedures can become rule-bound in the sense that too much red tape prevents decisions being made quickly. Even more seriously, to the extent that the personal career interests of bureaucrats depend on the status of the bureaucracy itself, they have a vested interest in putting the particular aim of increasing the power and authority of the bureaucracy ahead of the universal ends that were supposed to be served by the bureaucracy. Civil servants might become more concerned with protecting the status of the civil service, even of one government department against another, than with delivering a decent service to the public.

In terms of its political and cultural impact, Weber was also very concerned that bureaucracy has irrational tendencies in the sense that it might override individual freedom and integrity. Based on his own analysis of what was happening in German society during the 1890s, he feared that as more and more aspects of the decision-making process became gathered into fewer and fewer hands, bureaucracies, and the bureaucrats who ran them, would smother personal freedoms resulting in the emergence of what he famously called ‘a new iron cage of servitude’. In the political sphere, the turn towards democracy also meant the spread of detailed procedures for conducting democratic elections, which in turn entailed greater reliance on the electoral process and electoral officials. Consequently, democratization of a state also means bureaucratization, particularly since modern political parties themselves are developing more and more into bureaucratic organizations. This tension between the wider purposes (substantive rationality) of the political process, and the narrow functional priorities (formal rationality) of bureaucracy, is a good example of the kind of value conflict we discussed earlier.

Weber was greatly concerned that aided by the increasing centralisation of authority, a new class of professional bureaucrats might be tempted to subvert bureaucratic authority for their own ends. His major reservations about the prospects of a socialist Germany were less to do with the values of the socialist belief system, than with the practical problems it would create through the yet further bureaucratisation of society. As it turned out, the concerns expressed by Weber were amply substantiated in respect of the version of socialist/communist society that emerged as the Soviet Union during the 20th century. This society was profoundly criticised because of the way the bureaucracies of party, state and military contrived, so it seemed, to deprived citizens of representation, right and liberty.

Despite his foreboding, Weber believes that bureaucracy was essential to the operation of large scale industrial societies. In particular, he believed that the state and economic enterprise could not function effectively without bureaucratic control. It therefore made little sense to try and dispense with bureaucracy.
However, Weber was fearful to the end to which bureaucratic organizations could be directed. They represented the most complete and effective institutionalization of power so far created. In Weber’s view, bureaucracy has been and is a powerful instrument of the first order, for the one who controls the state bureaucratic administration. He saw two main dangers if this control was left in the hands of bureaucrats themselves. Firstly, particularly in times of crisis bureaucratic leadership would be ineffective. Bureaucrats are trained to follow order and conduct routine operations rather than to make policy decisions and take initiatives in response to a crisis. Secondly, in capitalist society, top bureaucrats may be swayed by the pressure of capitalist interests and tailor their administrative practices to fit the demands of capital.

Weber believed that these dangers could only be avoided by the strong parliamentary control of the state bureaucracy. In particular, professional politicians must hold the top positions in various departments of the state. This will encourage strong and effective leadership since politicians are trained to take decisions. In addition, it will help to open the bureaucracy to public view and reveal any behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing between bureaucrats and powerful interests. Politicians are public figures, open to public scrutiny and the criticism of opposition parties. They are therefore accountable for their actions.

But even with politicians at the head of state bureaucracies, problems remain. The professional politician lacks the technical knowledge controlled by the bureaucracy and may have little awareness of its inner working and procedures. He is largely dependent on information supplied to him by bureaucrats and upon their advice as to the feasibility of the measures he wishes to take. He may well end up being directed by the bureaucrats. Seymour M. Lipset shows that it is possible for government bureaucracy to exercise considerable control over its ‘political masters’ in his study of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a socialist government, in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Lipset found that the entrenched bureaucracy was successfully able to scuttle the reformist policies of this new socialist government. People’s representatives appointed as ministers to control the bureaucracy proved ineffective.

Lipset’s study illustrates Weber’s fears of the power of bureaucrats to act independently from their “political masters”. Weber believed that only strong parliamentary government could control state bureaucracy. He suggested that state bureaucrats should be made directly and regularly accountable to parliament for their action. The procedure for doing this is the parliamentary committee which would systematically cross-examine top civil servants. In Weber’s view, ‘This alone guarantees public supervision and a through inquiry.'
Weber’s view of bureaucracy is ambivalent. He recognized its ‘technical superiority’ over all other forms of organization. He believed that it was essential for the effective operation of large-scale industrial society. While he saw it as a threat to responsible government, he believed that this threat could be countered by strong political control. However, he remained pessimistic about the consequences of bureaucracy for human freedom and happiness.

Much of the later research on organizations can be seen as a debate with Weber. Students of organizations have refined, elaborated and criticized his views. In particular, they question the proposition that bureaucracy organized on the lines of the Weber’s ideal type is the most efficient way of realizing organizational goals. It has been argued that certain aspects of the ideal type bureaucracy may in practice, reduce organizational efficiency. The critical remarks of some of the important scholars have been discussed below.

For example, in contrast to Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy and his stress on formal and contractual relationships, Robert E. Cole in his study *Japanese Blue Collar: The Changing Tradition* states that Japan has been able to achieve high industrial growth by harmonically synthesising the traditional familial structures, loyalty and paternalistic attitude of the management with the demands of the industry.

In an article entitled, *Bureaucratic Structure and Personality*, Robert K. Merton argues that certain aspects of bureaucratic procedure may be dysfunctional to the organization. In particular, they may encourage behaviour which inhibits the realization of organizational goals.

Firstly, the bureaucrat is trained to comply strictly with the rules but, when situations arise which are not covered by the rules this training may lead to inflexibility and timidity. The bureaucrat has not been taught to improvise and innovate and in addition he may well be afraid to do so. His career incentives such as promotions are designed to reward conformity. Thus he may not be inclined to bend the rules even when such actions might further the realization of organizational goals.

Secondly, the devotion to the rules encouraged in bureaucratic organization may lead to a displacement of goals. There is a tendency for conformity to official regulation to become an end in itself rather than the means to an end. That in this way, so called bureaucratic red tape may stand in the way of providing and efficient service for the clients of the organization.

Thirdly, the emphasis on impersonality in bureaucratic procedures may lead to friction between officials and the public. For example, patients in a hospital or
unemployed youth in an employment exchange may expect concern and sympathy for their particular problems. The businesslike and impartial treatment they might receive can lead to bureaucrats being seen as cold, unsympathetic, abrupt and even arrogant. As a result, clients sometimes feel that they have been badly served by bureaucracies. While agreeing that the various elements of bureaucracy outlined in Weber’s ideal type serve to further organizational efficiency, Merton maintains that they inevitably produce dysfunctional consequences. He suggests that ‘the very elements which conduce towards efficiency in general produce inefficiency in specific instances’.

Weber presented an ideal type bureaucracy and argued that organizations in modern industrial society were increasingly moving towards that model. However, he had little to say about why actual organizations varied in terms of their approximation of the ideal type apart from suggesting that bureaucracy was particularly suited to the administration of routine tasks. Alvin W. Gouldner’s study of gypsum plant in the USA seeks to explore this problem. It is concerned to ‘clarify some of the social processes leading to different degrees of bureaucratization’.

Alvin Ward Gouldner (1920 – 1980), an American sociologist, carried out an intensive analysis of one plant owned and operated by the General Gypsum Company. The plant consisted of two parts, a gypsum mine and a factory making wallboards for which gypsum is a major ingredient. There was a significant difference in the degree of bureaucratization between the mine and the factory. In the mine the hierarchy of authority was less developed, the division of labour and spheres of competence were less explicit, there was less emphasis on official rules and procedures and less impersonality both in relationships between workers and between them and the supervisors. Since, in Gouldner’s view, these elements are ‘the stuff of which bureaucracy is made’, then ‘bureaucratic organization was more fully developed on the surface than in the mine’. The following example illustrates this point.

In the mine, supervisors usually issued only general instructions leaving it to the miners to decide who was to do the job and how it was to be done. If a miner wanted assistance, he rarely went through the ‘proper channels’ to obtain orders to direct others to assist him. He simply asked his workmates for help. Official duties were not clearly defined. Miners rotated jobs amongst themselves and often repaired machinery, a job which in the factory was the clear prerogative of the maintenance engineer. Lunch hours were irregular, varying in length and the time at which they were taken. Supervisors accepted and worked within this informal organization. They were ‘one of the lads’ and placed little emphasis on their officially superior status. One miner summarized the situation as follows, ‘Down
here we have no rules. We are our own bosses’. By comparison, the factory was considerably more bureaucratic. The hierarchy of authority, the division of labour, official rules and procedures and impersonality, were more widespread and developed.

Gouldner gives the following reasons for the difference in degrees of bureaucratization between mine and surface. Work in the mine was less predictable. The miners had no control over the amount of gypsum available and could not predict various dangers such as cave-ins. No amount of official procedures could control such factors. Miners often had to make their own decisions on matters which could not be strictly governed by official rules, for example, strategies for digging out the gypsum and propping up the roof. Since the problems they encountered did not follow a standard pattern, a predetermined set of rules was not suitable for their solution. By comparison, the machine production of wallboard in the factory followed a standard routine and could therefore be ‘rationalized’ in terms of a bureaucratic system. Fixed rules and a clearly defined division of labour are more suited to predictable operations. The ever present danger in the mine produced strong work group solidarity which in turn encouraged informal organization. Miners depended on their workmates to warn them of loose rocks and to dig them out in the event of a cave-in. In the words of one old miner, ‘Friends or no friends, you got all to be friends’. A cohesive work group will tend to resist control from above and to institute its own informal work norms.

Part of Gouldner’s study is concerned with the arrival of a new manager at the gypsum plant. He came with instructions from head office to cut costs and raise productivity. From the start he attempted to abolish unofficial practices, insisted on the rigorous application of formal rules and instituted a set of new rules which severely limited the workers’ autonomy – for example they were not allowed to move round the factory at will. Rule breaking was to be reported to the appropriate authorities, official reports of the details were to be passed up the administrative hierarchy and punishments were to be strictly imposed in accordance with the rules. The new manager thus attempted to increase the degree of bureaucratization in the plant. Gouldner argues that management will tend to do this when it believes that workers are not fulfilling their work roles. The degree to which it achieves this will depend on the ‘degree of bureaucratic striving on management’s part’ and the ‘degree of resistance to bureaucratic administration among the workers.’

Despite the forceful attempts of the new manager to impose a strongly bureaucratic system, it was effectively opposed by the miners. Gouldner attributes their success to strong work groups solidarity. They were able to present a united front to management and frustrate many of its demands. In addition, the miners’
immediate supervisors, who worked with them underground, were also opposed to
the new system. They believed that the miners should be exempt from certain rules
and that this privilege was justified by the dangers of the job.

A number of tentative conclusions may be drawn from Gouldner’s study.
Firstly, bureaucratic administration is more suited to some tasks than others. In
particular, it is not well suited to non-routine, unpredictable operations. Secondly,
the advance of bureaucracy is not inevitable as Weber and others have implied. As
the case of the gypsum miners indicates, it can be successfully resisted. Thirdly,
Gouldner suggests that sociologists who are concerned with a utopian vision which
involves the abolition of bureaucracy would be more fruitfully employed in
identifying ‘these social processes creating variations in the amount and types of
bureaucracy. For these variations do make a vital difference in the lives of men’.
By directing their research to this area, sociologists may be able to give direction to
those who wish to create organizations with greater democracy and freedom.

In his major work, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954), Gouldner lead
an ethnographic study in a mine and identified there various patterns of
bureaucracy and bureaucratization. He analyzed how, after the appointment of a
new manager the bureaucratization process emerged. Gouldner identified three
types of bureaucracy in his studies, with very specific patterns. These are:

- Mock bureaucracy
- Representative bureaucracy
- Punishment-centered bureaucracy.

**Mock bureaucracy:** This type comes from outside agency and is implemented
officially, but not in daily behaviors. Both management and workers agree in this
case to act the same way. The rules are not enforced in this case, neither by
management, nor by the workers. No conflict seem to emerge in this case.
“Smoking” is in this case seen as inevitable. The “no-smoking rule” is an example
of mock-bureaucracy.

**Representative bureaucracy:** Both management and workers enforced this rule
and it generated very few tensions. In this context, the focus was on the education
of workers as management considered them as ignorant and careless regarding
security rules. The safety program is an example of representative. Meetings
happened regularly to implement this program and it was as well the occasion to
voice some concerns for workers. For the management, this program was a way to tighten the control over workers.

**Punishment-centered bureaucracy:** This type of program was initiated by management and generated many tensions. Management viewed workers as deliberately willing to be absent. Therefore, punishment was installed in order to force the workers not to be absent. For example, the “no-absenteeism” rule is an example of the punishment-centered bureaucracy.

**Summary of factors associated with the three patterns of bureaucracy:**

1. *Who Usually Initiates the Rules?*

Mock bureaucracy: The rule or rules are imposed on the group by some “outside” agency. Neither workers nor management, neither superiors nor subordinates, identify themselves with or participate in the establishment of the rules or view them as their own. For example, the “no-smoking” rule was initiated by the insurance company.

Representative bureaucracy: Both groups initiate the rules and view them as their own. For example, pressure was exerted by union and management to initiate and develop the safety programme. Workers and supervisors could make modifications of the program at periodic meetings.

Punishment-centered bureaucracy: The rule arises in response to the pressure of either workers or management, but is not jointly initiated by them. The group which does not initiate the rule views it as imposed upon it by the other. For example, through their union the workers initiated the bidding system. Supervisors viewed it as something to which the Company was forced to adhere.

2. *Whose Values Legitimate the Rules?*

Mock bureaucracy: Neither superiors nor subordinated can, ordinarily, legitimate the rule in terms of their own values.

Representative bureaucracy: Usually, both workers and management can legitimate the rules in terms of their own key values. For example, management legitimated the safety program by tying it to production. Workers legitimized it via their values on personal and bodily welfare, maintenance of income, and cleanliness.

Punishment-centered bureaucracy: Either superiors or subordinates alone consider the rule legitimate; the other may concede on grounds of expediency, but does not
define the rule as legitimate. For example, workers considered the bidding system “fair”, since they viewed it as minimizing personal favoritism in the distribution of jobs. Supervisors conformed to it largely because they feared the consequences of deviation.

3. Whose Values Are Violated by Enforcement of the Rules?

Mock bureaucracy: Enforcement of the rule violates the values of both groups. For example, if the no-smoking rule were put into effect, it would violate the value on “personal equality” held by workers and supervisors, since office workers would still be privileged to smoke.

Representative bureaucracy: Under most conditions, enforcement of the rules entails violations of neither group’s values. For example, it is only under comparatively exceptional circumstances that enforcement of the safety rules interfered with a value held by management, say, a value on production.

Punishment-centered bureaucracy: Enforcement of the rules violates the values of only one group, either superiors or subordinates. For example, the bidding rules threatened management’s value on the use of skill and ability as criteria for occupational recruitment.

4. What Are the Standard Explanations of Deviations from the Rules?

Mock bureaucracy: The deviant pattern is viewed as an expression of “uncontrollable” needs or of “human nature”. For example, people were held to smoke because of “nervousness.”

Representative bureaucracy: Deviance is attributed to ignorance or well-intentioned carelessness – i.e. it is an unanticipated byproduct of behaviour oriented to some other end and thus an “accident”. This we call a “utilitarian” conception of deviance. For example, violation of the safety rule might be seen as motivated by concern for production, rather than by a deliberate intention to have accidents. If, for example, a worker got a hernia, this might be attributed to his ignorance of proper lifting technique.

Punishment-centered bureaucracy: In the main, deviance is attributed to deliberate intent. Deviance is thought to be the deviant’s end. This we call a “voluntaristic” conception of deviance. For example, when a worker was absent without an excuse, this was not viewed as an expression of an uncontrollable impulse, or as unanticipated consequence of other interests. It was believed to be willful.
5. What Effect Do the Rules Have Upon the Status of the Participants?

Mock bureaucracy: Ordinarily, deviation from the rule is status-enhancing for workers and management both. Conformance to the rule would be status impairing for both. For example, violation of the no-smoking rule tended to minimize the visibility of status differentials, by preventing the emergence of a privileged stratum of smokers.

Representative bureaucracy: Usually, deviation from the rules impairs the status of superiors and subordinates, while conformance ordinarily permits both a measure of status improvement. For example, the safety program increased the prestige of workers’ job by improving the cleanliness of the plant (the “good housekeeping” component), as well as enabling workers to initiate action for their superiors through the safety meetings. It also facilitated management’s ability to realize its production obligations, and provided it with legitimations for extended control over the worker.

Punishment-centered bureaucracy: Conformance to or deviation from the rules leads to status gains either for workers or supervisors, but not for both, and to status losses for the other. For example, workers’ conformance to the bidding system allowed them to escape from tense relations with certain supervisors or to secure jobs and promotions without dependence upon supervisory favors. It deprived supers of the customary prerogative of recommending workers for promotion or for hiring.

6. Summary of Defining Characteristics or Symptoms

Mock bureaucracy:

(a) Rules are neither enforced by management nor obeyed by workers.

(b) Usually entails little conflict between the two groups.

(c) Joint violation and evasion of rules is buttressed by the informal sentiments of the participants.

Representative bureaucracy:

(a) Rules are both enforced by management and obeyed by workers.

(b) Generates a few tensions, but little overt conflict.

(c) Joint support for rules buttressed by informal sentiments, mutual participation initiation, and education of workers and management.
Punishment-centered bureaucracy:

(a) Rules either enforced by workers or management, and evaded by the other.

(b) Entails relatively great tension and conflict.

(c) Enforced by punishment and supported by the informal sentiments of either workers or management.

This completes our discussion on Gouldner’s contributions in facilitating our understanding of the various patterns of industrial bureaucracy. In response to Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy, Gouldner argued that bureaucracy may manifest different patterns under different contexts.

Gouldner’s conclusions are supported by the findings of research by Tom Burns and G.M. Stalker. From a study of twenty Scottish and English firms, mainly in the electronics industry, Burns and Stalker argue that bureaucratic organizations are best suited to dealing with predictable, familiar and routine situations. They are not well suited to the rapidly changing technical and commercial situation of many sectors of modern industry such as the electronics industry. Since change is the hallmark of modern society, bureaucratic organizations may well be untypical of the future.

Burns and Stalker construct two ideal types of organization which they term ‘mechanistic’ and ‘organic’. The firms in their research range between these extremes. The mechanistic organization is very similar to Weber’s model of bureaucracy. It includes a specialized division of labour with the rights and duties of each employee being precisely defined. Specialized tasks are coordinated by a management hierarchy which directs operations and takes major decisions. Communication is mainly vertical: instructions flow downward through a chain of command, information flows upward and is processed by various levels in the hierarchy before it reaches the top. Each individual in the organization is responsible for discharging his particular responsibility and no more.

By comparison, areas of responsibility are not clearly defined in organic organizations. The rigid hierarchies and specialized divisions of labour of mechanistic systems tend to disappear. The individual’s job is to employ his skills to further the goals of the organization rather than simply carry out a predetermined operation. When a problem arises, all those who have knowledge and expertise to contribute to its solution meet and discuss. Tasks are shaped by the nature of the problem rather than being predefined. Communication consists of
consultation rather than being predefined. Communication consists of consultation rather than command, of ‘information and advice rather than instructions and decisions’. Although a hierarchy exists, it tends to become blurred as communication travels in all directions and top management no longer has the sole prerogative over important decisions nor is it seen to monopolize the knowledge necessary to make them. Burns and Stalker argue that mechanistic systems are best suited to stable conditions, organic systems to changing conditions.

Weber has often been criticized for focusing exclusively on the formal structure of bureaucracy, that is the official rules and procedures, the authorized hierarchy of offices and the official duties attached to them. His critics have argued that unofficial practices are an established part of the structure of all organizations. They must therefore be included in an explanation of the functioning of organizations. Peter Blau claims that Weber’s approach ‘implies that any deviation from the formal structure is detrimental to administrative efficiency’. However, on the basis of his study of the functioning of a federal law enforcement agency in Washington DC, Peter Blau argues that the presence of both formal and informal structures in the organization may together enhance the efficiency of the organization. On the other hand, the presence of formal structures alone, may act as a hindrance towards the attainment of organizational goals.

**Weber: An Assessment**

Weber’s importance as a classical sociologist did not begin until Talcott Parsons introduced him to the American public. Parson himself studied and defended a dissertation in Heidelberg during the latter half of the 1920s. And in 1930 he translated *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* into English. Parsons later based much of his book *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) on Weber, and as Parsons’s influence grew in American and later in international sociology, Weber also gained more and more status as a classic.

Weber’s contribution to modern sociology is multi dimensional so much so that he can be legitimately considered as one of the founding fathers of modern sociology. He contributed a new perspective on the nature of subject matter of sociology and laid down the foundations of interpretative sociology. In addition, he carried out penetrating analysis of some of the crucial features of western society like social stratification, bureaucracy, rationality and growth of capitalism. As should be clear from this introduction to Weber’s work his influence on social theory has been considerable.
Firstly, by viewing the subject matter of sociology in terms of social action, he highlighted the significance of subjective meanings and motives in understanding social behavior. This view of Weber presented an alternative and a corrective to the positivist approach in sociology. The positivists like Durkheim, by assuming a deterministic perspective had almost totally ignored the role of the individual’s subjectivity in shaping social behavior. They had restricted the study of social behaviour to externally observable aspects only. Thus Weber’s emphasis on exploring the subjective dimension provided a corrective to overly social determinist perspective of the positivist.

Secondly, in terms of methodology, Weber extends the conceptual tool kit of social theory by drawing attention to uniqueness of social phenomena and especially to their qualitative and subjective dimensions. While recognising the difficulty of doing so, he recommends that social phenomena need to be seen from the point of view of social actors themselves, and not just from the abstract vantage point of the social theorist. His discussions of Verstehen, ideal types, causal pluralism and value-neutrality are intended to assist in this process. Thus, Weber came to be seen as one of the founders of a “subjectivist” and phenomenological sociology.

Thirdly, Weber extends the analysis of social development offered by Marx in order to include not only material economic factors, but intellectual ones as well. It is the struggle over ideas that fuels social development not just technological innovation. Raising an issue that has been taken up by social theorists such as Anthony Giddens during the 20th century, Weber also draws attention to the fact that social events are much more contingent than we might like to think they are. He still tells us an interesting and persuasive story about the historical origins of modern capitalism, but all the while insists that things could have turned out quite differently. Social theory needs to work at the level of actual events rather than trying to interpret events in order to substantiate a general theory of how thing ought to or must have developed.

Fourthly, corresponding with his methodological recommendation of trying to understand social action from the point of view of the individual social actor Weber strongly supports the need for social theory to include non-material phenomena. He thus prepares the way for a much more forthright analysis of the importance of hermeneutic or meaning-laden aspects of social phenomena that was to follow later in the 20th century.

Further, Weber’s methodological individualism also sets him apart from Durkheim and Marx, both of whom adopt a strongly collectivist interpretation of social action. Although Weber accepts that social actors often act together, and with shared ideas and common aims in mind, he resists the idea that individuals are
drawn towards particular ways of acting by the pull of collective forces. Weber’s social theory is more voluntaristic in the sense that social actors choose how to act rather than being compelled to do so by social forces beyond their control. For much the same reason, Weber concentrates on a theory of social action and not on a theory of society.

Finally, and in terms of his own sociological analyses of modern society, Weber identifies the crucial significance in social development of the general concept of rationality, which was central to Enlightenment thought and the idea of reason. He then refines this into a robust and thoroughly modern concept of instrumental rationality. Although opinion differs over the exact formula of instrumental rationality it is widely accepted that this is the kind of rationality that is most characteristic of modern society. One of the major preoccupations of critical social theory and the Frankfurt School, and of Jurgen Habermas, is to continue to explore the negative impact on modern society of the idea of instrumental rationality described by Max Weber.

During the past decade, in particular, with its debate over “postmodernism,” Weber’s critique of blind faith in science and rationality seems to have appealed to many. Thus, he is not just an early predecessor of modern sociology and social science, but he is definitely present, participating in the debate over the problems of modern society.

A note on the conflict tradition after Marx and Weber:

Although the foundations of the conflict approach to the study of social phenomena were laid down by Karl Marx. However to adapt this approach to contemporary societies, it had to be interpreted in the light of the criticism and modification suggested by Weber. Thus, the imprint of Weber’s ideas is clearly visible in the works of contemporary conflict theorists like C.W. Mills and Ralf Dahrendorf. Even those belonging to the Frankfurt School of thought namely Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas etc. have also been influenced by Weber’s ideas. However, Ralf Dahrendorf a contemporary German scholar has presented the conflict theory in a more systematized manner.

Ralf Dahrendorf in his book Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society also examines the usefulness and applicability of Marx’s sociological work to the study of modern industrial society. He argues that Marx’s analysis of 19th century capitalist society was largely correct and his concepts and theories were valuable. However these concepts and theories require to be modified if they are to be applied to the modern industrial society because they refer to specifically to the
19th century capitalistic society. There have been highly significant changes in the social structure since Marx’s time. In fact these changes have been great enough to produce a new type of society, that is, modern industrial or post-capitalist society. Dahrendorf wishes to generate a body of concepts and theory which will be general enough to explain both capitalist and post capitalist societies. He endeavors to generate his new theory directly out of Marx’s analysis preserving, modifying and occasionally abandoning some concepts. Dahrendorf suggest that the following changes of the social structure have been sufficient to produce a post capitalist society.

- **Decomposition of capital** (stock holders and managers): This implies the separation of ownership and control over large corporations such as joint stock companies where the ownership (in the form of equity) lies with the public at large while the control is exercised by the management, professionals, technocrats and other experts. With the growth in the scale of business companies due to technological advances and due to the development of joint stock limited liability companies, the link between the ownership and control of industry has weakened. Much control is now exerted by salaried managers, who tend to legitimize their position in industry and in society rather differently than old style capitalist. Capitalists too play a somewhat different role as shareholders or as company directors.

- **Decomposition of labour** (from homogeneous group of equally unskilled and impoverished people, to differentiated occupational groups, with differentiated attributes and status (prestige, responsibility, authority)): Dahrendorf believes that during the twentieth century there has been a ‘decomposition of labour’, a disintegrating of the manual working class. Contrary to Marx’s prediction, the manual working class has become increasingly heterogeneous or dissimilar by the emergence of new differentiations of skill. He sees this resulting from changes in technology arguing that ‘increasingly complex machines require increasingly qualified designers, builders, maintenance and repair men and even minders’. Dahrendorf claims that the working class is now divided into three distinct levels: unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled manual workers. Differences in economic and prestige rewards are linked to this hierarchy of skill. In view of the differences in skill, economic and status rewards and interests within the ranks of manual workers, Dahrendorf claims that ‘it has become doubtful whether speaking of the working class still makes much sense’. He believes that during the twentieth century there has been a ‘decomposition of labour’, a disintegration of the manual working class. In other words, like the controlling groups, the workers have also become more differentiated. The
proportions of both skilled and semi skilled workers have grown and the proportion of unskilled workers has fallen. Far from becoming homogenized in terms of class consciousness, the workers are becoming increasingly aware of the differences between themselves.

- **Institutionalisation of class conflict** (industrial bargaining): According to Dahrendorf, the tension between labour and capital is recognized as a principle of the structure of the labour market and has become a legal institution of society. As workers have become increasingly skilled, educated and better paid, they have become more integrated into the middle layers of society. The traditional sources of discontent and labour militancy have been dissolved. The basis for class struggle is gone. Conflicts now develop within imperatively coordinated associations (institutional structures such as business organizations, unions and so forth) and are resolved rationally and fairly through mediation, arbitration or adjudication.

- **Development of a new middle class**: This term is misleading in that it refers to a large and growing collection of different groups which have been created or have expanded with the industrialization of society. It is a category rather than a class in terms of Marx’s use of this concept and is made up of white collar workers such as teachers, accountants, surveyors, nurses and clerks, etc.

- **Growth of social mobility**: There is much more inter generation mobility between occupations and self recruitment – where the son follows the father’s occupation – is great only in the very top and the very low occupations.

- **Growth of equality**: Over the last hundred years social and economic inequalities have been reduced as the state has guaranteed a minimum standard of living to its citizens and has heavily taxed those with the highest incomes and those with the greatest wealth.

Dahrendorf concludes that society can be characterized correctly in terms of conflict between competing interest groups. In a post-capitalist society, however conflicts have becomes institutionalized i.e. more orderly patterned, predictable and controllable. Workers have the right to express their interests legitimately through socially acceptable machinery like collective bargaining which is conducted through their own bona fide organisations like trade unions. Conflict is not now so bitter and as potentially destructive of the social system because the changes in social structure listed above give everyone some stake in the system. Interests are pursued according to the rules of the game. The rules require the use
of the established machinery for dealing with conflicts created by competing interest groups.

In the light of these arguments Dahrendorf points out what he considers to be the weakness of Marx’s theories and suggests ways in which they can be modified in order to give a useful basis for analyzing both capitalist and post-capitalist societies. For him, the basic weakness of Marx’s approach is in the way Marx ties power – economic, social and political – to the ownership of the means of production. Dahrendorf argues that social classes are not necessarily and inevitably economic groups, that social conflict is not necessarily shaped or determined by the economic base. For Dahrendorf, authority relationships represent the key feature of a society. In any society some individuals have the right or authority to give commands to others. These others have in turn the duty to obey. Thus individuals who share identical interest of commanding or of obeying in some sphere of activity, whether it be political, economic and industrial, may be described as a quasi group i.e. a potential group. If these interests are articulated so that members become conscious of them, then these interests become manifest and become the basis of organized and self conscious interest groups. Dahrendorf defines social classes as organized or unorganized categories of people who share manifest or latent interests arising from their positions in the authority structures in which they find themselves. For him then conflict is merely any conflict of groups arising from authority relationships. Dahrendorf argues that most people in society are unlikely to be engaged in one mighty political, economic, social, and industrial conflict which is generated from one structural source, that is, property relationships. Instead changes in social structure (as listed above) create the social structural basis for a plurality of interest groups and hence a plurality of bases for control.

In this way, Dahrendorf attempts to refine and develop Marx’s approach to understand the social world. However, not all writers share his view that a new type of society has succeeded capitalism. For example, John Westergaard, a British sociologist, in his ironically titled article The Withering Away of Class – A Contemporary Myth suggests that despite some changes modern industrial societies are still similar in their basic structure to capitalist societies. Though certain changes since Marx’s time have obscured the visibility of the working of the social system and have made the growth of class consciousness harder to achieve, the system is still largely built around the private ownership of the means of production and social life is, therefore, shaped in most respects by this fact.
A note on Marxian view of bureaucracy:

To Weber, bureaucracy is a response to the administrative requirements of all industrial societies, whether capitalist or communist. The nature of ownership of the forces of production makes relatively little difference to the need for bureaucratic control but from a Marxian perspective, bureaucracy can only be understood in relation to the forces of production. Thus in capitalist society, where the forces of production are owned by a minority, the ruling class, and state bureaucracy will inevitably represent the interest of that class. Many Marxists have seen the bureaucratic state apparatus as a specific creation of capitalist society. Weber believed that responsible government could be achieved by strong parliamentary control of the state bureaucracy. This would prevent the interests of capital from predominating. Lenin, though, maintained that Western parliaments were ‘mere talking-shops’ while the ‘real work of government was conducted behind closed doors by the state bureaucracy’. In his view, ‘The state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another’.

Since state bureaucracy is ultimately shaped by a capitalist infrastructure, its control can only be eliminated by a radical change in that infrastructure. In terms of Marxian theory, this requires the communal ownership of the forces of production. Since state bureaucracy is basically a repressive means of control, it must be smashed and replaced by new, truly democratic institutions. Lenin believed that after the dictatorship of the proletariat was established in the USSR in 1917, there would be a steady decline in state bureaucracy. He recognized that some form of administration was necessary but looked forward to the proposals outlined by Marx and Engels. Administrators would be directly appointed and subject to recall at any time. Their wages would not exceed those of any worker. Administrative tasks would be simplified to the point where basic literacy and numeracy were sufficient for their performance. In this way, everybody would have the skills necessary to participate in the administrative process. Members of a truly communist society would no longer be imprisoned in a specialized occupational role. Lenin looked forward to a future in which ‘all may become “bureaucrats” for a time and that, therefore, nobody may be able to become a “bureaucrat”’. He envisaged mass participation in administration which would involve ‘control and supervision by all’. In this way the repressive state bureaucracies of the West would be replaced by a truly democratic system.

Lenin offers little more than a vague and general blueprint for the future. He gives few specific details of how the democratization of state bureaucracy is to be accomplished and of how the new institutions will actually work. In practice, the 1917 revolution was not followed by the dismantling of state bureaucracy but by its expansion. Lenin puts this down to the ‘immaturity of socialism’, but there is no evidence that the increasing maturity of the USSR has reversed the trend of
bureaucratization. In fact many observers have seen bureaucracy as the organizing principle of Soviet society. For example, Alfred Meyer argues that, ‘The USSR is best understood as a large, complex bureaucracy comparable in its structure and functioning to giant corporations, armies, government agencies and similar institutions in the West’. Milovan Djilas draws a similar picture with particular emphasis on what he sees as the exploitive nature of bureaucratic control. According to Djilas, political bureaucrats in the USSR direct the economy for their own benefit. The mass of the population is seen to have little opportunity to participate in or control the state administration.

While admitting that ‘bureaucratization does militate against democratic control’, David Lane maintains that in the case of the USSR, ‘this must not detract from the fact that a centralized administration has been a major instrument in ensuring industrialization and social change’. Lane claims that these changes have benefitted all members of society. He believes that the state bureaucracy is committed to the development of an industrial nation leading eventually to a classless society. As such it will operate in a very different way from state administrations in the west. Whatever the merits of these various viewpoints, one thing remains clear. Communal ownership of the forces of production has not resulted in the dismantling of bureaucratic structures.

Probably the most valiant attempt to remove bureaucratic control was made in China under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. Ambrose Yeo-chi King gives the following details of the ideals and practice of administration during the ‘Cultural Revolution’. While recognizing the need for some form of administrative organization, the Maoists rejected the model of bureaucracy provided by Weber’s ideal type. They insisted that organizations must be controlled by and directly serve the ‘masses’, that is those at the base of the organizational hierarchy and the clientele of the organization. This is to be achieved not simply by the participation of the masses but by placing control of the organization directly in their hands.

The ideal organization is pictured as follows. The rigid hierarchy of officials will be abolished. Hierarchies are seen to block communication, to encourage ‘buck passing’ and to stifle the creative energies and initiative of the masses. Leaders will remain but they will lead rather than command. The specialized division of labour and the fragmentation of tasks are rejected in favour of a system whereby everyone should ‘take care of everything’ within the organization. The expert will become a figure of the past since his technical knowledge and expertise will be spread amongst the masses. The full-time professional administrator will disappear. All administrative leaders must spend some of their time involved in actual production in the fields and factories. Finally, the fixed rules and regulations which characterize the typical bureaucracy are seen as instruments to repress the
masses. They should therefore be changed as the masses see fit. Yeo-chi King notes that these ideals were put into practice in the following ways. Firstly by means of the ‘role shifting system’ whereby leaders moved to the base of the organization. In theory, this would allow them to empathize with the masses and minimize, if not eliminate, status differences. Secondly by means of ‘group-based decision making systems’, where for example, workers directly participate in the various decisions required for running a factory.

While applauding the spirit of these measures, Yeo-chi King has serious doubts about their practicality. At best he believes they have ‘a high tendency towards organizational instability’. He sees them offering little hope for the economic modernization of China on which the Maoists placed such emphasis. With China’s more recent moves towards the West, it appears that the organizations by which ‘the Masses take command’ have been put to one side. Yeo-chi King suggests that ‘Mao’s intervention was a kind of charismatic breakthrough from the bureaucratic routinization’. If Weber is correct and charismatic authority is rapidly routinized into traditional or rational-legal authority structures, then the organizational experiments of the Cultural Revolution were necessarily shortlived.
4. Sociological Thinkers
Max Weber

Q. Differentiate between ‘Life-chances’ and ‘Life-style’ with suitable examples. (2019/10)

Q. Compare and Contrast the contributions of Marx and Weber on social stratification in capitalist society. (2019/20)


Q. Distinguish between fact and value in Weber’s Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism. (2018/10)

Q. What is Weberian critique of Marxist notion of social stratification? (2017/20)

Q. How is Durkheim’s theory of religion different from Max Weber’s theory of religion? (2016/20)

Q. Examine Max Weber’s method of maintaining objectivity in social research. (2016/20)

Q. Which concepts did Weber use to analyse the forms of legitimate domination? (2015/10)

Q. Discuss the role of Calvinist ethic in the development of Capitalism. (2015/20)

Q. How does Weber use the notion of ‘ideal types’ in his theory of bureaucracy? (2014/20)

Q. “According to Max Weber, ‘class’ and ‘status’ are two different dimensions of power.” Discuss. (2014/20)

Q. Examine the salient features of Weberian bureaucracy. (2013/10)

Q. ‘Power and authority go together,’ Examine. Explain the various types of authority also. (2012/30)

Q. Explain how Weber’s characterization of capitalism is different from those of Marx. (2012/30)

Q. Write short note on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, keeping sociological perspective in view. (150 words) (2011/12)

Q. Define Ideal Type and explain Weber’s concept of ‘Verstehen’ for understanding social phenomena. (2011/30)

Q. What, according to Max Weber, is the role of “particular religious ideas” in the emergence of modern capitalism? (2009/30)

Q. Using Max Weber’s theory, discuss what ethical and religious ideas produced capitalism in certain societies and how? (2008/60)
Q. What is the subject-matter of Sociology according to Max Weber? Which major methods did he suggest for social science research? Illustrate your answer with his sociological contributions. (2007/60)

Q. Write short note: Concept of Ideal Type and its Limitations. (2006/20)

Q. Discuss Max Weber’s ideal types and the role of authority in bureaucracy. (2005/60)

Q. Critically examine Max Weber’s theory of the Protestant ethics and the spirit of the Capitalism.” Could it be the otherwise possibility that the tenets of the Capitalism must also have effected the emergence of the Protestant ethics? Comment with suitable examples. (2003/60)

Q. Critically examine Weber’s theory of protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism. (2002/60)

Q. State the meaning and characteristics of an ideal type. What, according to Max Weber, is the use and significance of the ‘Ideal type’ in social science research? (2001/60)

Q. Critically examine Max Weber’s theory of social action and its limitations. (1997/60)

Q. Explain the origin and characteristics of bureaucracy according to Max Weber. Illustrate the structural sources of dysfunctions of bureaucracy. (1996/60)

Q. Critically examine the role of formal and informal structures of bureaucracy in economic and social reconstruction of the developing societies. (1995/60)

Q. What did Max Weber mean by Interpretative understanding? Why did he believe that to model sociological researches exclusively on strategies and ambitions of natural sciences was a serious mistake? (1994/60)

Q. Write short note: Ideal Types. (1994/20)

Q. Write short note: Authority. (1994/20)

Q. Write short note: Methods of Sociology according to Max Weber. (1993/20)

Q. Write short note: Protestant Ethic. (1991/20)

Q. What does Weber mean by ideal types? How is the concept relevant in sociology? (1989/60)

Q. In what respects do you think Weber’s conception of sociology differs from that of Durkheim? Which one of the two is more satisfactory? Substantiate your answer. (1988/60)

Q. Attempt a comparative analysis of the Weberian and Marxian theories of social change. Which do you think is more relevant to the Indian society at present? Give reasons for your answer. (1988/60)

Q. Do you agree with Max Weber that the Protestant ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism are correlated? What are the alternative theories suggested by other academies? (1987/60)

Q. Write short note: Ideal Types. (1987/20)
Q. Write short note: Ideal types and social analysis. (1984/20)