
UNIT 9 PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MAX WEBER'S WORK*

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

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

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

9.1 INTRODUCTION

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

*written by Shubhangi Vaidya, School of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Studies, IGNOU, New Delhi

9.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MAX WEBER

Max Weber was born on 21st April 1864 in Erfurt town of Thuringa, Germany, in a prosperous Protestant household. His father was a politician, and very much a part of the political establishment of the day, leading a luxurious lifestyle. His mother, Helene, was a deeply religious person whose values were opposed to those of her husband. Weber's parents had a strained marital relationship. This difficult relationship deteriorated over the years and had its impact upon their children, including young Max, whose divided loyalties to his parents later led to much psychological distress. Let us refer to Box 9.1 in order to look at early socialization and schooling of Weber.

Box 9.1 Early Socialization and Schooling of Weber

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 However, Weber was shy and withdrawn by nature in his school days.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

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 Here the shy and withdrawn Max Weber suddenly became active and began to mix socially.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

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

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

Even as his academic achievements took him to great heights, his personal life underwent a deep crisis due to his conflict with his father, whose sudden death after an argument with his son, upset Max Weber deeply. In fact, he held himself

responsible for his father's demise and suffered from feelings of intense guilt as a result. For several years, Weber suffered from mental breakdowns which eventually lead to him resigning from his professorship at the University of Heidelberg. It was only in 1903 that he was able to resume his scholarly work again, but he did not return to teaching for several years. His awful personal ordeal however did not prevent him from producing some of the greatest scholarly work that is remembered and admired even today. The themes he tackled included the interrelationship between religious ideas and economic and social change; the growth of 'rationality' as the defining feature of modernity; power and authority and the control of the modern state over the individual.

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

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

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

9.3 SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Weber was also a public intellectual who passionately engaged with and participated in the political sphere. A nationalist, he volunteered for military

service when the First World War broke out, even though he was fifty. He was however, deeply critical of the German leadership and war policies and advocated an overhaul of the political system, which made him very unpopular with the ruling dispensation. After Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War in 1918, Weber argued for sobriety in politics and assisted in the drafting of a new constitution and the founding of the German Democratic Party. He was known to take the side of social and political causes that were not popular or mainstream, and thus he was viewed with suspicion by the political elites of the day. Let us refer to Box 9.2 in order to find out Weber's political interests.

Box 9.2 Political Interests of Weber

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

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

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

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

Weber engaged with almost all the contemporary issues and debates of his times and his work captures the great shifts taking place in the society and history of

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

9.4 INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

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

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

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

These two styles of understanding resulted in a lively and ongoing discussion and debate amongst German scholars about the appropriate method for studying social and cultural phenomena, and in particular, the importance of the specific

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

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

The ideas of the German philosophers Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Dilthey greatly influenced Weber. Windelband posited that the aims and objectives of natural and cultural sciences were different. While the former aimed at generating universal laws, i.e. were 'nomothetic' in scope; the latter aimed at more particularistic understanding of unique phenomena, i.e. they were 'idiographic'. Dilthey believed that to properly undertake a study of human society and culture, it was not enough to study it from the outside, like a physical or natural phenomenon, but rather, from the inside, through experience and subjective understanding. In other words, the social scientist must try and put himself/herself in the shoes of the subject of the study and attempt to understand

or re-live their experiences and thus understand them empathetically. Weber's notion of *verstehen* or 'empathetic understanding' was deeply influenced by Dilthey's formulations. However, he conceived of empathetic understanding as only the first step in sociological analysis of a phenomenon, to be followed by a causal explanation that was closer to the positivist and empirical tradition of the natural sciences. You will learn more about what Weber meant by *verstehen* in Unit 12.

9.4.2 Causality and Probability

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

science which aims to understand clearly social behaviour and thus give a causal explanation of its course and results' (Bogardus, 1960: 477). While sociology must be concerned with empirical analysis of society and history, the method of sociology would have to be different from that of the natural sciences. Sociological analysis would have to examine social action within a context of social interaction, and would have to be interpretive, not viewing people as objects just driven by impersonal forces outside their purview.

In order to understand social behaviour or human actions, it is imperative that the social scientist engages with the values and beliefs that underlie the behaviour of human beings in society. At the same time, the researcher herself/himself brings on board their own personal beliefs, orientations and values, that may affect the way in which they themselves interpret and understand reality. Weber does not see this as a disadvantage. In fact, research in the social sciences can not only see the unfolding of events from the outside, but also contribute a deeper understanding of the motives, values and orientations that influence these events. Poggi (2006) gives the example of a person chopping logs of wood. A researcher may describe the external actions of a person chopping wood as an objective, external activity. But by looking at the underlying motivations for this activity, the researcher may consider the need for preparing fuel for the winter, or the need to keep oneself fit through this physical activity or even take out one's anger on one's neighbour by chopping wood instead. Thus, we see that Weber played a major role in developing an 'hermeneutic' tradition in social science, which emphasised the role of individual subjectivity as the starting point of social relationships and processes.

9.4.3 Objectivity and Values in Social Sciences

Weber was clear that there was no such thing as an 'objective' science of society, unlike the earlier founders of Sociology. As we have discussed earlier, one of Weber's major concerns was the relation between science and human action. While emphasising the importance of values in understanding social behaviour, he was also equally clear that the personal evaluations of the sociologist must be separate from the analysis of the society and processes under study. He distinguished between 'value relevance' and 'value neutrality'. In other words, even if a researcher selects a particular problem for investigation because of his/her interest or value orientations, the process of inquiry and the study of the phenomenon at hand must be strictly in accordance with the value-neutral principles of science. In other words, the researcher cannot twist or manipulate the findings to suit his or her own ideology or value system. Value neutrality highlights the gap between 'facts' and 'values'; Weber held that an empirical science can never advise a person what s/he should do; however, it can clarify for that persons what s/he can or wants to do (see Coser 1997: 221-222). According to Weber, the role of the scientist was not to engage in moral debates or to act

like prophets or sages, but rather, to throw light upon facts and their interrelationships. Let us refer to Box 9.3 to understand the place of values in social sciences.

Box 9.3 Values in Social Sciences

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 1

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

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9.5 CENTRAL IDEAS

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

9.5.1 Ideal Types

Weber emphasised the need for the researcher to separate his/her 'value judgments' from 'judgements of fact', by rigorous examination of factual data and the development of clearly defined concepts which help us to understand the different configurations of a social phenomenon under specific circumstances. This led him to develop his formulation of the 'ideal type', about which you will study in detail in another Unit of this Course. Ideal type is a methodological tool in which a certain model or construct of the reality to be studied is formulated by the researcher, by abstracting the most prominent features of that phenomenon. It acts as a measuring rod to compare the similarities and differences between the 'real' and the 'ideal, and enables the researcher to construct hypotheses linking them with the conditions that led to a particular phenomenon or event becoming prominent, or the consequences resulting from the emergence of a particular phenomenon. For instance, if you wish to study the functioning of parliamentary democracy in a society, it will be advisable, following Weber, to construct an ideal type of parliamentary democracy, abstracting its most prominent features and constructing a model or an image of its most significant aspects. Then by comparing the empirical reality with this 'ideal type', you will be able to gain an insight into the historical reasons for its emergence as well as a better understanding of how it actually operates in a specific socio-historical context. We will learn more about ideal types in the next Unit.

9.5.2 Social Action

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

Durkheim was concerned with institutional arrangements that maintained the cohesion of social structures, while Marx devoted attention to class struggles, and to changing social and economic structures. "In contrast, Weber's primary focus was on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their

mutual orientations within specific social-historical contexts.” (ibid, p 217). Weber identified four major kinds of social action-traditional, emotive/affective value oriented rational action and goal-oriented rational action. While traditional action is based upon values and customs of the society; affective action upon the emotional state of mind of the individual at a particular time. Rational action entails pursuing certain goals using rational means. Value-oriented rational action involves the pursuit of certain values or goals that may not be ‘rational’, e.g., spiritual goals, through means that are designed to achieve the goal, e.g., prayer, meditation etc. Finally, Goal-oriented rational action, wherein goals and means are rationally chosen (e.g., an engineer building a structure using the most efficient means available), is regarded as the defining feature of modern Western society, about which Weber wrote and theorised extensively. Weber held that it was this distinguishing way of acting in all the realms of social life that made modern Western societies qualitatively different from non-Western ones.

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

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

9.5.3 Rationality

Many scholars have remarked upon the central themes of rationality and rationalisation as fundamental to understanding Weber’s work. By rationality Weber referred to logical and coherent ideas and behaviour that govern human activity. Rationalisation is the process by which rationality applies to different aspects of life. Let us refer to Box 9.4 in order to understand in detail what is meant by rationality and rationalisation.

Box 9.4 Meaning of Rationality and Rationalisation

According to Weber, the contemporary world is characterised by rationality. Max Weber believed that the key to understand modern society is to be found in its rational features and rationalising forces. For him, the modern Western world is characterised by rationality. As a result of this, human activity is marked by methodical calculation. Quantification, predictability and regularity become important. Individuals rely more on logic, reason and calculation than on supernatural beliefs. To Weber rationalisation means that “principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious power existed” (Weber 1946: 139, cf. Hearn 1985: 76). Let us take an example. If a farmer wants to reap a good harvest, he can spend time, energy and money on conducting *poojas* and prayers. On the other hand, he can utilise the same effort and expense in digging irrigation canals or a tube-well so that his crops may thrive. In the first case, he is dependent on “mysterious incalculable forces”; in the second case he is using rational calculation.

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

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

As we have seen earlier, Weber’s vision of the future was that of a world so highly regulated and rationalised, that we would become prisoners of our own device, trapped in an “iron cage” of our own making. Weber’s analysis of the effects of the iron cage of bureaucracy on individuals and society draws attention

to the way the bureaucratic rationality of modern Western societies exerts such control that it delimits human freedom and possibilities. The rational, organising principles of modern bureaucracy include a system of hierarchical roles, a high degree of specialisation and compartmentalisation of knowledge, ‘merit -based’ employment based upon rules and regulations, and a rational-legal authority structure. This rational, bureaucratic system, common to most modern states, develops a life and legitimacy of its own and cannot be questioned by the people who it is supposed to serve. Thus it becomes constraining and limiting rather than empowering and enabling, crushing individual autonomy and freedom. This pessimistic vision of the future of humankind would be interesting for the learners of the present times to discuss and debate, particularly in the light of their own experiences of living in a modern state.

9.5.4 Religion and Economy

At the outset, it seems difficult to see a connection between religion and economy. Many of us would think that religious beliefs and values have nothing to do with economic activities. Well, Weber held a different view. Let us refer to Box 9.4 in order to understand Weber’s perspective on religion and economy.

Box 9.5 Weber’s Perspective on Religion and Economy

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

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

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

While Marx provided a systematic model of capitalism and capitalist development, Weber provided a wider and broader analysis, drawing attention to those aspects and concepts that were not given emphasis by Marx. Weber examined the historical unfolding of capitalism by paying due attention to economic and political factors along with the role of cultural factors like values, ideas and religious beliefs. Unlike Marx who gave primacy to economic factors,

Weber gave emphasis to cultural factors which shaped the way human beings thought about a particular activity (in this case economic activity) and thus influenced their actions. Weber's thesis on the development of capitalism, unlike Marx, did not just focus on the material dimensions and technological factors, but the realm of ideas that human beings held and how these ideas prompted them to act. After carefully studying the factors that lead to the growth of capitalism in the west, Weber proposed the hypothesis that it was the 'Protestant ethic' that broke the hold of traditional ways of thinking and acting, and propelled an entirely new way of working and accumulating wealth.

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

Check Your Progress 2

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

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

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9.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit introduced you to some of the major ideas of Max Weber, who is regarded along with Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx as one of the founding fathers of Sociology. We discussed the biographical and social factors that shaped his work and ideas, and highlighted his participation in the politics of the

day as a public intellectual. We showed how he brought in the dimension of empathetic understanding of human motivations and highlighted the role of culture and values in shaping economic and political processes and systems, thereby providing a more rounded and holistic analysis of capitalist society and social change. We discussed his methodological approach which was rigorous and methodical and sought to establish historical and sociological causality and probability by careful examination of the facts and deep analysis of their interrelationships. We concluded by highlighting his emphasis on value neutrality in social science research.

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9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

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

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Weber identified four major kinds of social action-traditional, emotive/affective, value oriented rational action and goal-oriented rational action. Goal-oriented rational action, wherein goals and means are rationally chosen (e.g., an engineer building a structure using the most efficient means available), is regarded as the defining feature of modern Western society.

- 2) Karl Marx emphasised the role of economic factors in the development of capitalism. Weber's ideas on the development of capitalism, unlike Marx, did not just focus on the material dimensions and technological factors, but also on the realm of ideas that human beings held and how these ideas prompted them to act. Weber studied the development of capitalism by paying due attention to economic and political factors along with the role of cultural factors like values, ideas and religious beliefs.

