UNIT 12: MAX WEBER: IDEAL TYPES, AUTHORITY AND BUREAUCRACY

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- outline some of the important contributions of Max Weber to Sociology like Ideal Types, Authority and Bureaucracy
- discuss the concept and the significance of ideal types
- define 'Authority' and its three ideal types
- critically discuss the concept of 'Bureaucracy'
- critically summarise the contributions of Weber to Sociology.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

At the time of an intellectual atmosphere that wanted social sciences to be as '**objective'** as the natural sciences, Weber put forward his concept of '*verstehen'* (understanding) as the method *par excellence* of Sociology. He argued that unlike the objects studied in the natural or physical sciences, the objects of social sciences comprise of 'thinking', 'reflexive' beings. Therefore, in social sciences, one should study why the object 'thinks' and behaves in a particular way. This is in contrary to the natural sciences, where it is not required to know why, say, an atom or a molecule 'thinks' and behaves in a particular way. We have already discussed the meaning and significance of social actions in the previous unit. In this Unit, we will continue with the contributions of Weber to sociology and highlight the various concepts he used in explaining his various ideal types, and also in establishing relations among them. In this Unit, we will particularly discuss the concept of **Ideal Types Authority** and **Bureaucracy.**

12.3 IDEAL TYPES

12.3.1 Definition

"*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 a hypothesis; rather it is a mental construct, formed by exaggerating certain essential features of a given phenomenon.



LET US KNOW

We have, in abstract economic theory, an illustration of those synthetic constructs which have been designated as "ideas" of historical phenomena. When we formulate the model of "free market economy", we develop an ideal picture of events on the commodity-market under conditions of a society

organized on the principles of an exchange economy, free competition and rigorously rational conduct. It is called free competition when the forces of demand and supply operate rationally, and there are no external and non rational forces in operation. In an actual situation, we find the operation of non rational and many other factors in operation in the exchange system. A free market economy is an ideal type, and it enables us to compare actual situations with this ideal.

12.3.2 Characteristics

- The ideal type is a clearly constructed *ideal model* of a specific set of social relationships, of which an understanding and causal explanation is sought.
- It is not a description of those factors which are thought to be found "on average" in that kind of configuration. It is *not the average situation*.
- It is *not an ideal in the sense of ethically good or right.*
- It is ideal and rational only in the sense of being a *conceptual and logical ideality,* attributing a *pure rationality of means-ends actions* simply as a limiting case.

Thus, the ideal type is *not an exhaustive description* or account of an entire social configuration. It simply explains the *distinctive, essential and typical characteristics* or traits of phenomena that is logically precise, and does not present the total reality.

12.3.3 Comparison Between Ideal Types and Common Sense

In order to explicate the nature of ideal type and its application in explaining the social world, Weber compares it with our common sense exercises. He amply highlights the practicality of ideal types and its usage in almost every sphere of our effort to understand the world around us. Weber draws our attention to the fact that, as

laymen and in our ordinary discourse, common people use their 'ideal types'. For example, when we conceptualise phenomena like, "democracy", "communism", "Pakistanis", ''Indians", or the "Irish", we take into consideration only certain elements such as the characteristic highlights of these phenomena. We select only those attributes, which, for us, is of cultural significance and which we think as distinctive. Thus, in our ordinary exercise of explaining the phenomena around us, we implicitly use a model. Additionally, when we select the characteristic attributes, we do so, often, in an unscientific manner. Weber draws attention to this and stressed that Ideal types need to be made explicit, and as such, it should follow scientific methods and procedures, so that our knowledge of the world around us, particularly the social world, becomes scientific and systematic. It is with this aim that Weber conceptualised Ideal types and its use in the explanation of the social world, thus triggering further exploration of social phenomena and its underlying factors and characteristics.

To recapitulate, *ideal types are abstract logical models that take into consideration the existence of a rational link between the end and means of human social actions.* (The ends may be non-rational, and so also the means from an objective point of view). It is a model of what an actor/agent would do if he were to act completely rationally, according to the criteria of rationality involved in his behaviour's sense.

12.3.4 Uses of Ideal Types

- The ideal type provides a *point of reference* in understanding the social behaviour under consideration. By comparing the actual type with the ideal type, it can be found out how far the actual approximates or deviates from the ideal type.
- Ideal types provide the basis for *exploring the causes* behind social phenomena and the *relationship between phenomena*. Once the social phenomena are conceptualized and their

characteristics identified, then, one can move on to the next scientific level of probing the relationship between them.

- Ideal types are mental constructs of rational behaviour, of a logical model, which in reality do not occur entirely in that manner. The discovery of the deviation of the actual behaviour from the ideal types will stimulate the researcher to probe into the causality of that social behaviour, and to *ascertain the part played by irrationality and chance intrusion* of accidental, emotional and other elements into the social action. Thus, ideal types are measuring rods and *provide the tool to start a scientific investigation* of social phenomena.
- It even leads a researcher to the *new directions of investigations into causality*. New hypothesis may be developed to explore the possible relation between social phenomena. New concepts may also be developed to explain social actions.

12.3.5 Methods of Constructing Ideal Types

Weber emphasized the application of the following methods in the construction of Ideal types:

- comparison,
- observation and
- historical method

12.3.6 Types

Weber developed three kinds of ideal types based on their levels of abstraction. These are as follows:

- Based on *historical particulars*: It refers to particular social phenomena in historical reality, such as World War I, India's Freedom Movement, the French Revolution, etc.
- Based on the *abstract generalization from particular phenomena*. It refers to abstract elements of the historical and cultural context such as "bureaucracy", "authority", "capitalism", etc. In this regard,

"revolution", "freedom movements", etc. belong to this category. (In fact, it is akin to the exercise of seeking regular relationship between phenomena, which Weber termed, sociological causality.)

- Based on the *rationalizing reconstructions* of a particular kind of behaviour. This would include the entire propositions in economic theory.

Having discussed in detail on Ideal Types, Weber constructs certain ideal types such as ,"capitalism", "Protestantism", "authority", "bureaucracy", etc., and goes on to conceptualise the relationship between capitalism and Protestantism, the causality of bureaucracy, etc.

We have to bear in mind that all throughout his discussion on Ideal types, Weber highlighted that Ideal types are simply models, and hence these cannot cover the entire range of actual social behaviour of human beings.

12.4 AUTHORITY

In *Economy and Society* (1922), Weber analysed 'power' as a fundamental concept in social relationships, as the basis for social stratification. Weber defined *'power' as the ability of persons or groups to carry out their 'will', even when opposed by others.* Authority is a sub-type of power in which people willingly obey or give commands because they consider the exercise of power or domination– as legitimate. Authority is legitimate. Weber believed that in modern societies, action and behaviour are influenced more by value-oriented rationality (*Wertrational*).

Weber identified three ideal types of 'legitimate domination' or 'authority' –traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic.

- **Traditional Authority:** This authority is based on continuity over time. The leader delivers a traditional message or holds a traditional office, according to ancient customs and practices. Example: The authority of the Dalai Lama.
- **Legal-Rational Authority:** This type of authority derives its legitimacy from a generally agreed set of formal rules and procedures,

which have been established by regular, public procedures. Bureaucracy is the principal example of this type of authority.

- **Charismatic Authority:** In the case of charismatic authority, followers obey commands because of the charisma or personality of the leader. Charismatic authority may disrupt tradition, bring in social change, and counter bureaucratic rigidity in democracies. For example, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi brought about changes in society through their charisma. But then such authority is temporary and often with the death of the charismatic leader, his/her principles are turned into institutionalised structures of tradition or may be vested with bureaucratic rational-legal authority.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: State whether the following are True or False:

a) Authority is a form of legitimate domination or power.

b) Traditional and Charismatic Authority are forms of social relationship, but Legal-Rational Authority is not.

12.5 BUREAUCRACY

We have noted in section 12.4. that Bureaucracy is an example of legal-rational authority. Therefore, it is also a sub-type of power. It refers to a system of administration and to the body of administrative officials. Though Weber contributed mostly to the study of bureaucracy, he did not coin the term (it was coined in France at the beginning of the 19th century). He, however, best defined the term and regarded it as the best administrative form for the pursuit of rational or efficient goals.

Weber regarded Bureaucracy as an outcome of the 'rationalisation' process in mass democracies, to maintain the leaders' legitimate domination over the electorate. Thus, Bureaucracy develops within a rational-legal framework and emphasises on the impersonal and legal exercise of power.

12.5.1 Characteristics

The characteristics of Bureaucracy can be identified as:

- A hierarchy of offices, and the channelling of communication through hierarchical levels.
- Maintenance of files and secrecy.
- Clearly defined areas of authority for the different hierarchies within the office.
- The sphere and extent of authority is clearly determined and governed by rules and regulations.
- Separation of official activities from private affairs.
- Trained personnel occupy office.
- Bureaucratic officials are not elected. They are appointed from above and enjoy long-term tenure and high status.
- Officials have a fixed salary and retirement pension.
- Officials have to display a sense of loyalty to their office.

12.5.2 Advantages

Weber identified the following advantages of Bureaucracy:

- Bureaucracy implies rationality and calculability, which *minimises risks* and *uncertainties*.
- Bureaucracy is supposed to *ensure effeciency* in administration.
- Democracy is supposed to act as a '*levelling process'* whereby all are equal before law and get equal treatment.
- Weber noted that apart from democracies, bureaucracy is also tied to the capitalist market economy, which demands the continuous and unambiguous discharge of public and private administration.

12.5.3 Disadvantages

Though bureaucracy has several plus points, Weber did not fail to regard the rationalisation process in a pessimistic view. Due to the indestructibility of a fully established bureaucratic structure, the following disadvantages may crop up:

- Officials cannot be removed from office even if they are inefficient.
- Bureaucracies maintain administrative secrecy, which prevents public scrutiny and oversight.
- Bureaucracy, because of the several layers of hierarchy, encourages corruption and the passing around of responsibilities.
- The number of files slows efficiency.
- Officials may concentrate more on the rules and regulations, than on the actual work.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.2: State whether the following are True or False:

a) Weber coined the term 'bureaucracy'. (True/False)

b) Bureaucracy is a form of legal-rational authority. (True/False)

c) Weber regarded bureaucracy as the best administrative form to meet organisational goals. (True/False)

12.6 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF WEBER'S CONTRIBUTIONS

- Weber also used the method of 'Ideal Types' to study social action and institutions. However, critics claim that though Weber constructed 'Ideal Types' as models for comparison and analysis, and not as models to be tested, yet, he often tested the 'ideal types' as real models in society.
- Weber was also the first to extensively and critically study authority or 'legitimate domination' and bureaucracy. These studies have greatly shaped future research.
- His explanation that economic behaviour is affected by non-economic behaviour, like religious values, and vice versa, have been amply corroborated by many later sociological studies.



12.7 LET US SUM UP

- Ideal types are models that serve a researcher in his/her attempts to explain social actions, and also to utilize in the conceptualization of the relations between social phenomena.
- 'Power' is the ability to carry out one's 'will', even when opposed by others.
- Authority is a sub-type of power, where exercise of power is seen as legitimate. Weber identified three types of 'authority' –traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic.
- Bureaucracy is an example of legal-rational authority. Therefore, it is also a form or sub-type of power. It emphasises on the impersonal exercise of power, according to rational rules.



12.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abraham, Francis and Morgan, J. H. (1985); *Sociological Thought*; Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.
2) Coser, Lewis A. (2004); *Masters of Sociological Thought*; Delhi, Jaipur: Rawat Publication.



12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: a) True, b) False

Ans. to Q. No. 2: a) False, b) True, c) True



12.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What is Ideal Types? What are the different kinds of Ideal Types?

Q.2: Define 'Authority'. Discuss the different types of Authority.

B) Long Questions: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Define Bureaucracy. What are its characteristics? Discuss its various forms.

Q.2: Briefly discuss the relationship between Authority and Bureaucracy.

Q.3: Discuss Authority and Bureaucracy as forms of Social relationship.

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