

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M2: Weber and Structuration

Introduction

The main purpose of these Notes is to provide a basic overview of different sociological perspectives. Each set of notes is organised around three basic themes:

1. **A brief overview of the perspective.**
2. **An outline of the “basic principles” on which each perspective is based.**
3. **A brief evaluation of the perspective.**

These Notes are, therefore, intended to serve as a general introduction to different perspectives, although they may also be used as revision notes.

Weber and Structuration

The concept of a "**sociological perspective**" is a useful organisational device, in the sense that it allows us to identify theoretical similarities between broad groups of writers (Functionalist, Marxists, Feminists, Interactionists and so forth). However, one **major problem** with the concept is that some writers **do not fit easily** into the broad categories we create for our convenience - and one such writer is **Max Weber**. Different observers have variously categorised Weber as an Interactionist (the originator of Social Action theory) or as a (non-Marxist) Conflict theorist. In recent times, Weber has also been seen as being the (unwitting) founder of the sociological perspective **developed** by Anthony **Giddens** called "**Structuration**".

The reason for this theoretical confusion is that Weber's sociology does not sit easily in **either** of the great perspective camps. Elements of his sociology emphasise the importance of **objective social structures**, whilst elements also stress the importance of **subjective social actions**. For this reason, therefore, I've classified **Weber** under the heading of the **Structuration** perspective (and will leave it up to you to decide whether or not this is justified...).

Much of the work of Max Weber was directed towards a **critique** of the ideas that have been associated with **Marxist** sociology. In particular, Weber took issue with the idea that **economic relationships** should be considered the most significant relationships in any society. In this respect, Weber **rejected** what he saw as the "**crude economic determinism**" of many of the **Marxist writers** whose work followed-on from the initial, pioneering, ideas and theories of Karl Marx.

For Weber, questions concerning how **order** was maintained in society and how **change** developed and was **managed** were crucial to his sociological understanding. In this respect, Weber argued for a **multi-causal analysis** of **social change**, for example, whereby any number of important **variables** could, in certain combinations, help to promote and manage social change. This was particularly in evidence in his analysis of the development of **Capitalism** and the role in this development of the **Protestant religion** ("Religion and the Spirit of Capitalism")

While **Marx** tended to see the role of **religion** in this process as a simple **ideological** one (the emerging bourgeoisie adapted the teachings of the Calvinist religion to their own social ends), **Weber** argued that **Calvinism** was the **crucial variable** involved in our understanding of how technological development came, in some societies but not others, to mean the development of Capitalist forms of economic production.

The difficulty of pigeon-holing Weber in perspective terms comes from the fact that:

a. He recognised the part played by **social structures** in conditioning the way in which individuals view the social world and their position within that world. Weber, for example, understood how the nature of economic organisation in society gave rise to particular forms of values and norms. In this respect, Weber understood that people **experienced** the social world in an "**objective**" form; that is, as something that seemed to press down upon them, shaping their desires.

b. He also recognised the importance of looking at the way in which individuals were able to **shape** their own destiny within the **context** of particular social arrangements. In this respect, Weber noted the idea that people could **act** in purposeful ways; that their behaviour was **not simply** a response to their social conditions. People took note of the behaviour of others and planned their own actions accordingly.

In the above respect we can see the "**Structuration**" aspect of Weber's sociological outlook, in that he wanted to try and **combine** the ideas of social **structure** and social **action** to arrive at a "fully sociological" analysis of the social world and people's behaviour within that world. To do this, therefore, sociologists would have to understand the way in which people **create and maintain** social relationships in their everyday life (the social **action** aspect), while simultaneously recognising that people's relationships formed a **complex web of rights, routines, rules and responsibilities** that "reflected back" upon their behaviour - affecting the range of choices that people saw as being open to them in their behaviour, for example.

An example of this approach can be seen in relation to Weber's concept of **social class**, which he saw as but **one type** of social **inequality** (others might involve inequalities based on **gender, age, ethnic** group membership and so forth). For Weber, both the **objective** and **subjective** dimensions of class were considered highly significant.

An individual's **objective social position** clearly influenced the way in which they **experienced** the social world (the **life chances** of a non-manual worker tending, on the whole, to be significantly greater than those of a manual worker, for example). However, the **subjective dimension** is also important since what the individual feels about their social position (rightly or wrongly) will have huge consequences for their behaviour.

In terms of the way sociologists can **study** the social world, Weber argued that we should seek to take advantage of our ability to **empathise** with other human beings (the concept he used was that of "**Verstehen**" - to comprehend or understand); that is, we should take advantage of **our ability to see the world as others see it** and this involved a form of "**subjective sociology**" that focused on understanding the **meanings** and **interpretations** of individual social actors (which is similar to the Interactionist perspective).

Unlike Interactionists, however, Weber was far more concerned to look at the **objective** features of social life - the great social structures that arose out of the complicated pattern of social relationships that people formed in their everyday lives.

For Weber, therefore, the objective of sociological analysis was the attempt to **understand** the way people both created and made sense of the social world. He argued that sociological analysis was very different to the "common sense" forms of analysis that people used in their everyday lives. The sociologist needed to be able to construct **theories** which **explained** the **causes** and **consequences** of social actions, although care had to be taken not to confuse the ability to demonstrate why people behaved in certain ways in certain situations (cause and effect) with the notion that we could establish "social laws" governing behaviour that were somehow "true for all time".

In this respect, sociologists had to strive to be **personally objective** in their work, while at the same time recognising that the ability to **understand** people's **meanings** and **motives** were an **important** element in the understanding of the basis of social life. Sociologists, therefore, should attempt as far as was humanly possible **not** to allow their personal values to influence the nature of their work (sociology was not to be seen simply as an attempt to impose one set of values - those of a sociologist - onto an understanding of social behaviour). Personal objectivity was to be valued, while, at the same time, recognising that the ability to understand subjective actions was also a valuable tool in the sociologists armoury.

Finally, Weber attempted to combine the concern with the relationship between social structures and social action by proposing that one way of understanding their relationship was to think in terms of a **methodological** concept called the "**ideal type**". What Weber tried to do here was to encourage sociologists to think about the way people would behave in "**idealised situations**". That is, we can use our ability to think and to visualise situations and, by so doing create theoretical constructs based around an extrapolation of the real world to create an "ideal type" of society.

Thus, we could construct an idealised version of Capitalist society as it would be / could be and then measure the extent to which the reality of our society diverges from this ideal type of reality. We could similarly look at other societies to see the extent to which they **diverge** from this "ideal reality" ("ideal" in the sense of relating to ideas pure and simple, making them "larger than life" rather than "ideal" in the sense of "the best of all possible worlds"). By doing this we could come to some conclusion about the relative relationship between social structures and different forms of social behaviour / actions in different real capitalist societies.

Weber argued that all **theories** about the social world were **partial**; that is, they reflected a particular point-of-view or perspective. To understand sociologically, therefore, what was required was that the sociologist should reduce their theoretical viewpoint down to its essence - the essential features that encapsulate their theoretical perspective. Once this is done, these essential beliefs or assumptions would be apparent and then could be extrapolated into an "ideal type" society against which we could judge the current reality of our society.

For example, the basic ideas underpinning Marxism would involve isolating the essential features of Capitalism (in terms of mode of production, the relationship between competition and monopoly and so forth). By extrapolating from these ideas we would then arrive at an ideal view of the Marxist perception of reality. This view would be no-more or no-less valid than any another view - it would simply be different to the ideal type created by radical feminists or Functionalists.

If this all seems a little confusing, that's because it is - but if you think about the reading you've just done, you might appreciate that what is involved here is a form of "**ideal type**" categorisation of various essential points-of-view. Each sociological perspective has been stripped down to its essential points and then, from our understanding of these essential points we start to construct an idealised or "larger than life" perception about "what a Functionalist believes" or "how a Marxist feminist sees the world".

Once you've done this, you then start to think about how each of these perspectives approximates to the reality that you hold. In effect, you start to criticise these views which, in turn, means that you do not believe some or all aspects of each perspective - for example, by criticising Radical feminism for seeing "men" as the "class enemy" of women you are saying that your version of reality does not accord with that of Radical feminists...

Two further ideas to note in terms of Weber's general sociology are those of modernisation and rationalisation. In basic terms Weber argued that social development followed an inevitable process of modernisation in tandem with a process of rationalisation (that is, as people's knowledge about the nature of the natural and social world increased, their behaviour and organisation is increasingly based on rational principles. In this respect, Weber's sociology is clearly "modernist").

Allied to these ideas, Weber also noted that bureaucratic forms of organisation (which are essentially based on rational principles of organisation) are highly-characteristic of Modern societies.

Basic Principles.

1. It is difficult to adequately categorise Weber's sociological perspective within the "Structuralist" / "Interactionist" dichotomy. Some writers characterise Weber as a (non-Marxist) Conflict theorist, whilst others characterise him as a Social Action theorist. For the purposes of this Study Pack I have characterised him as a Structuration theorist. That is, in terms of the idea that we can comprehend the nature of social reality best by trying to combine both objective and subjective elements.

2. Weber accepted that the social world was highly structured (that it had certain objective features), whilst also arguing that we need to understand how people subjectively interpret their social world.

3. Social action (that is, purposeful, subjective, behaviour) occurs within a social context (that is, the structure of the social world, an individual's life and so forth).

A person's **life chances** are all affected by this social (structural) context. For example, being born into a rich or a poor family will affect the way an individual experiences and interprets their world. This will also affect their behaviour, range of possible actions and the like.

4. Weber used the concept of an "ideal type" to help us analyse the structure of human behaviour sociologically. An ideal type is a theoretical extrapolation of the real world (as we theorise it) into an ideal type of society. In this way we can use the ideal that we create to measure the extent to which real societies approximate to our ideal.

5. Weber disagreed with Marx(ists) that the economic dimension to social life was always the most significant in determining people's range of behaviour. Weber argued that various forms of conflict in society could occur independently of economic considerations.

6. He developed the idea that a form of value-free sociology was possible. Social scientists should make the assumptions they use in the construction of theories clear so that other scientists can challenge / change these assumptions. Complete "value-free", in the sense of complete freedom from the influence of values, was not seen by Weber as being logically possible.

Some Basic Points of Criticism...

1. Weber has been criticised by sociologists such as **Newby and Lee** ("The Problem of Sociology", 1983) on the basis that the focus of his methodological attention (that is the way in which Weber saw it as possible to produce reliable and valid knowledge about the social world) leans too far in the direction of the motives and intentions of individual social actors.

While Weber clearly saw social structures as being important theoretical concepts in the understanding of human interaction, the criticism here is that he paid too much attention to the way in which "isolated individuals" could be seen to construct their own version of social reality.

2. A second point that leads-on from the above is that while it is sociologically interesting to consider human behaviour in terms of both the nature of social structures and social action, Weber tends to see each aspect of social life as both theoretically separate (on the one hand we have social structures and on the other we have human actions) and theoretically inseparable (we can only understand social action on the basis of its structural context and we can only understand social structures on the basis of the way they are created by human actions).

While this may or may not be true, it appears to be a perspective that is neither one thing nor the other. At times social structures are seen to be the most significant aspect (when their influence severely restricts people's range of possible choices), while at other times social action is considered to be the most significant aspect (when people can choose to "ignore" the pressures placed upon their behaviour to conform, deviate and so forth).