**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 20: Max Weber 1: Introduction**

* Max Weber was born in 1864 in Erfurt (SE Germany). His father was a lawyer, bureaucrat, and politician with a taste for life; his mother a devout Calvinist. There was some marital tension, though he was initially influenced by his father. Yet, Weber was more influenced by his mother in the long run.
* Shy and underdeveloped socially, he entered the University of Heidelburg at age 18 and joined his father’s old dueling fraternity. There, along with drinking copious amounts of beer, he developed socially, and soon followed his father into the legal profession.
* Leaving school after 3 terms to join the military, he served his time, afterwards entering the University of Berlin in 1884.
* After 8 years of study he completed his Ph.D, became a lawyer, and started teaching at the university. His interests shifted toward his lifelong concerns: economics, history, and sociology.
* Yet, during much of this time he remained financially dependent on his father, which he increasingly resented, and moved closer to his mother’s values. He eventually adopted an ascetic style of life and plunged deeply into his work, becoming, in effect, a workaholic.
* In 1896, he was hired as a professor of economics in Heidelburg. Things looked promising, but, the next year, his father died following a violent argument with Max. Soon afterwards, Weber suffered a nervous breakdown that left him incapacitated for 6-7 years.
* In 1904, Weber returned to academic life. He published his best known work soon afterwards; *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* (his mother’s influence effectively won out).
* While still suffering periodic psychological problems, he remained productive after this, showing great interest in world religion, society, history, and economics.
* Weber helped found the German Sociological Society in 1910, his home became a center for a wide range of intellectuals, and he wrote and was active politically on the issues of the day.
* There remained a tension in his life between his interest in the bureaucratic mind (representing his father) and religion (his mother). This unresolved tension permeates his work.
* Weber died in 1920 while writing what some consider his most important work, *Economy and Society.*
* Weber’s writings are generally known for their deep historical grasp of modern Western societies and comparative analysis of their economic, political, legal, and religious development.
* Intellectually, he was also influenced by: (1) the German historical school and its debates over whether the methods of the natural sciences could be used to study society (e.g. Heinrich Rickert); and (2) Marxist economics (which were pervasive during his life, and which he reacted to).

**Weber’s Theoretical Perspective and Fundamental Themes:**

Common themes in Weber’s work include:

1. Civilization processes and a focus on how Western Society arose when and where it did;
2. The key role played by rationalization in the development of Western society;
3. A concern with comparative studies of capitalism.

**The Debate with Marx:**

* Weber fundamentally disagreed with Marx on a number of key issues:

1. The nature and purpose of social theory (not to change society but to search for valid historical facts, patterns, and comparisons);
2. How to understand history and social development (not as a social critic with implicit value judgments but as a neutral academic observer);
3. The understanding of history and historical causes (rather than explaining social life through pure economic laws, non-economic factors have to be considered, such as the political, religious, and legal spheres of society);
4. Weber’s idea of the four major, interacting social spheres comprising society (political, legal, economic, and religious), no one of which is a dominant cause in historical and social change;

**The Theme of Rationalization**

* While Marx had thought material factors dominant in historical development, Weber emphasized the process of rationalization occurring in the four spheres comprising society (above).
* Broadly speaking, rationalization refers to several fundamental principles which link it to central ideas in Weber’s overall approach to historical development. These include:
  1. The principle of development inherent in the process of civilization in Western society;
  2. The stress on the rational containment of everyday life;
  3. The widespread use of calculation as a strategy of social action (e.g. the introduction of monetary exchange making force less necessary in acquisition, rational calculation of profit more so);
  4. The freeing of social action from all magical thought;
  5. The emphasis on a practical orientation to empirical reality; and
  6. The widespread use of technical and empirical reasoning as a way of controlling practical outcomes and mastering everyday life.
* Basically Weber stressed how nature, society, and individual action are increasingly mastered by an orientation to planning, technical procedure, and rational action.
* He believed that, more than others, modern Western societies reflect this tendency in their systems of law, politics, science, and commercial life. Indeed, this tendency gave rise to modern societies.
* Weber referred to this overall historical process in which social reality comes to be increasingly mastered by calculation, scientific knowledge, and rational action as *rationalization*.
* Yet, Weber distinguished this historical process from *rationality* itself, which essentially refers to a standard of social action whose substance consists of weighing up means and ends prior to action (i.e. cost-benefit analysis).
* In addition, Weber broke rationality itself down into four types:
  1. *Formal rationality*: this represents the amount of quantitative calculation and accounting procedure that goes into an action or decision to ensure consistency of outcome and efficiency in attaining goals;
  2. *Substantive rationality*: the degree to which action is shaped by an orientation to values regardless of the nature of the ends or outcome of action (e.g. ethics, social justice considerations);
  3. *Practical rationality*: a way of looking at the world in which the meaning of an act is believed to lie in its function or utility. Methods are seen as strategies or techniques to achieve useful ends (e.g. economic benefits, practical, technical ends); and
  4. *Theoretical rationality*: imposes order on reality through conceptual reasoning, through conceptual mastery of reality through unified concepts or patterns brought to light in the process of reasoning.

\* It will be well to keep Weber’s emphasis on rationality in mind in the next class, where we tackle Weber’s important substantive work on the nature of bureaucracy.