Max Weber: Modernity and the Role of Ideas

October 1, 2013

Andrew J. Perrin
Sociology 250
1. Briefing on the midterm exam
2. Weber: A Short Introduction
4. Graded papers available on Sakai as of 1:30 today
Max Weber: A Short Life Story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Born</th>
<th>1864, Erfurt, Germany</th>
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<tr>
<td>Educated</td>
<td>Heidelberg &amp; Berlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Major intellectual force in intellectual and political circles</td>
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<td>1897</td>
<td>Family quarrel leads to nervous breakdown</td>
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<td>1904</td>
<td>Emerges and tours USA, including trip to visit relatives in Mt. Airy</td>
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<td>1905–20</td>
<td>Writes most of his important work</td>
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<td>Died</td>
<td>June 14, 1920, pneumonia</td>
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Big Questions in Weber

- When are *ideas* important in history?
- How are modern societies organized?
- How do people learn to be capitalist individuals?
Verstehen

The proper role of social science

- Weber: *Verstehen* ("understanding") of social action is the proper goal of social science
- Contrast to Marx’s *parsimony*
- **Social Action**: anything done by anyone that is not completely instinctual or natural
The Importance of Ideas

- The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism
- Why do people work *harder* than they have to for survival?
- Rooted in a system of beliefs: **Protestant Asceticism**
- This logic leads followers to care deeply about material success
- Capitalist logic thus takes hold
Predestination: certain people are destined for heaven or hell, even before their birth.

Therefore, what those people do during life doesn’t impact their eventual destinations.

BUT... they are interested in displaying saved status to others.

They therefore work for worldly success as a measure of being in God’s favor.
The Persistence of Ideas

- Ideas’ impacts can persist long after the ideas are no longer credible

- That’s why ideas are so important in history:
  - Yes, they arise from material life, but
  - they have a life of their own
Weber: The Character of Modern Society

- Bureaucracy
- Rules, offices, files
- Rationalization/routinization

\[ \text{Wertrationalität} \Rightarrow \text{Zweckrationalität} \]

Value rationality \Rightarrow Pure rationality

- “Disenchantment of the World”
Die Geschichte aller bisherigen Gesellschaft ist die Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen.
The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.

Marx and Engels, 
Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei 
1847–49
...pseudowissenschaftlichem Operieren mit dem Begriff der “Klasse”, des “Klasseninteresses” führen, die heut vielfach üblich ist... daß zwar der Einzelne sich über seine Interessen irren könne, die “Klasse” über die ihrigen aber “unfehlbar” sei. ...pseudo-scientific operation with... ‘class’ and ‘class interests’... which has found its most classic expression in the statement of a talented author, that the individual may be in error concerning his interests but that the ‘class’ is ‘infallible’ about its interests.

Throughout history] Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.
[Under capitalism] the Bourgeoisie... has simplified the class antagonisms: Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.
... religions [are] snake skins which have been cast off by history.
Religion is... the *opium* of the people.
a religious man is said to make himself ready for the reception of the all-important grasp of the meaning of the world and of his own existence.
Social life is essentially *practical*. Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses.
Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not in order that man shall bear the chain without caprice or consolation but so that he shall cast off the chain and pluck the living flower.
very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.
The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
A Negro is a Negro. he only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money or sugar the price of sugar.
... religions created by intellectuals and meant to be rational have been strongly exposed to the imperative of consistency. The effect of the ratio ["reason"], especially of a teleological deduction of practical postulates, is in some way, and often very strongly noticeable among all religious ethics.
labour produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines—but some of the workers it throws back to a barbarous type of labour, and the other workers it turns into machines. It produces intelligence—but for the worker idiocy, cretinism.
The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home.
Those who have no property but who offer services are differentiated just as much according to their kinds of services as according to the way in which they make use of these services, in a continuous or discontinuous relation to a recipient.
But always this is the generic connotation of the concept of class: that the kind of chance in the *market* is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual’s fate. ‘Class situation’ is, in this sense, ultimately ‘market situation.’
[the philosophers say] this is an unavoidable misfortune, which must be borne quietly. The millions of proletarians and communists, however, think differently and will prove this in time, when they bring their “existence” into harmony with their “essence” in a practical way, by means of a revolution.
A class must be formed which has radical chains... which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal.... This... is the proletariat.
the direction in which the individual worker, for instance, is likely to pursue his interests may vary widely. In any case, a class does not in itself constitute a community. Political membership or class situation has at all times been at least as frequently decisive.
the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; . . . finally the distinction between capitalist and land-rentier . . . disappears and the whole of society must fall apart into two classes—the property-owners and the propertyless workers.
The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.
...the market and its processes ‘knows no personal distinctions’: ‘functional’ interests dominate it. It knows nothing of ‘honor.’
The bureaucracy... is... obliged to pass off the form for the content and the content for the form. ... Within the bureaucracy itself, however, *spiritualism* becomes *crass materialism*, the materialism of passive obedience, of faith in authority, of the *mechanism* of fixed and formalistic behaviour, and of fixed principles, views, and traditions.
The management of the office follows general rules, which are more or less stable, more or less exhaustive, and which can be learned. . . . The authority to order certain matters by decree. . . only [entitles the bureau] to regulate the matter abstractly. This stands in extreme contrast to the regulation of all relationships through individual privileges and bestowals of favor.
“Economically conditioned” power is not, of course, identical with “power” as such. On the contrary, the emergence of economic power may be the consequence of power existing on other grounds. Man does not strive for power only in order to enrich himself economically. Power, including economic power, may be valued for its own sake.
The class situation and other circumstances remaining the same, the
direction in which the individual worker, for instance, is likely to pursue his
interests may vary widely....
The emergence of an association or even of mere social action from a
common class situation is by no means a universal phenomenon.
“Parties” reside in the sphere of power. Their action is oriented toward the acquisition of social power, that is to say, toward influencing social action no matter what its content may be.
The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.
A developed sense of responsibility is absolutely indispensable.... it is necessary to have a *frame of mind* that emancipates the worker... from a constant question: .... how is the accustomed wage nonetheless to be maintained? This frame of mind, if it manages to uproot the worker from this concern, motivates labor as if labor were an absolute end in itself, or a “calling.”

*The Protestant Ethic*
The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.
politics is out of place in the lecture-room. It does not belong there on the part of the students. . . . Neither does politics, however, belong in the lecture-room on the part of the docents [professors], and when the docent is scientifically concerned with politics, it belongs there least of all.
We do not face the world in doctrinaire fashion, declaring, “Here is the truth, kneel here!” . . . We do not tell the world, “Cease your struggles, they are stupid; we want to give you the true watchword of the struggle.” We merely show the world why it actually struggles; and consciousness is something that the world *must* acquire even if it does not want to.
Life is complicated.
“Moi, je ne suis pas une Marxiste”
“Myself, I am not a Marxist.”

–Karl Marx (Attributed by Engels)

Late 1870s