

CHAPTER 5

Authority and Rationality—Max Weber (German, 1864–1920)



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Weber's writings are somewhat schizophrenic. . . . [I]n his voluminous works, one can find almost anything one looks for. There is plenty of material for Parsons' functionalism . . . and also for Schluchter or Habermas's rationalist evolutionism. Weber is a legitimate ally of the symbolic interactionists, as well as an influence upon Alfred Schutz, who in turn influenced social phenomenology and ethnomethodology. On the other hand, modern organization theory and stratification theory could reasonably emerge from Weber's work, and he could influence conflict sociologists . . . all these elements are in Weber. (Collins, 1986, p. 11)

Max Weber is one of sociology's most intricate thinkers. Part of this complexity is undoubtedly due to the breadth of his knowledge. Weber was a voracious reader with an encyclopedic knowledge and a dedicated workaholic. In addition, Weber was in contact with a vast array of prominent thinkers from diverse disciplines. As Lewis Coser (2003) comments, "In leafing through Weber's pages and notes, one is impressed with the range of men with whom he engaged in intellectual exchanges and realizes the widespread net of relationships Weber established within the academy and across its various disciplinary boundaries" (p. 257). This social network of intellectuals in diverse disciplines helped create a flexible mind with the ability and tendency to take assorted points of view (for a theoretical explanation, see Collins, 1998, pp. 19–79).

Another reason why I think Weber's writings are complex is due to the way he views the world. Weber sees that human beings are animals oriented toward meaning, and meaning, as we've seen, is subjective and not objective. Weber also understands that all humans are oriented toward the world and each other through values. Further, Weber sees the primary level of analysis to be the social action of individuals; for Weber, individual action is social action only insofar as it is meaningfully oriented toward other individuals. Weber sees these meaningful orientations as produced within a unique historical context. Weber's (1949) theoretical questions, then,

are oriented toward understanding “on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other hand the causes of their being historically *so* and not *otherwise*” (p. 72). What this means is that Weber contextualizes individual social action within the historically specific moment. He then asks the question, why does this cultural context exist and not another one? How is it that out of all the possible cultural worlds, this one exists right here, right now, and not a different one?

Weber’s perspective, then, is a cultural one that privileges individual social action within a historically specific cultural milieu. This orientation clearly sets him apart from Spencer, Durkheim, and Marx, who were much more structural in their approaches. It also means that Weber’s (1949) explanations are far more complex and tentative: “There is no absolutely ‘objective’ scientific analysis of culture . . . [because] . . . all knowledge of cultural reality . . . is always knowledge from particular points of view” (pp. 72, 81). Yet at the same time, as we will see, Weber believes that we can create objective knowledge. This knowledge is created mainly through ideal types and historical comparisons. Yet, while it is possible to create objective knowledge about how things came to be historically *so* and not *otherwise*, Weber was extremely doubtful about prediction. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

My point here is that Weber’s thinking is quite complex. And, as a result, Weber probably inspired our thinking in more areas than any other person. If we are going to study religion, bureaucracy, culture, politics, conflict, war, revolution, the subjective experience of the individual, historic trends, knowledge, or the economy, then we have to incorporate Weber. He is also a founding thinker in many distinct schools of sociological thought, such as ethnomethodology, interpretive sociology, geo-political theory, the sociology of organizations, and social constructivism.

But beyond these, there is still much to discover about Weber. All classics exist as such because of their ability to excite thought. For example, I read Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* about once a year, and every time I do I come away with some new insights. Yet these are really only new twists about things I pretty much already knew. However, Weber’s writings are so dense and expansive that when I reread him I come away with entirely new ideas, and some of these ideas are ones that haven’t ever been written about. Weber thus remains a wellspring for original sociological thought.

For example, one of the questions that Weber’s work has prompted is the problem of *voluntaristic action*: what are the conditions under which people make free choices about behavior in such a way that there is little uncertainty experienced in social life? Talcott Parsons, one of the most prominent social theorists of the twentieth century, took his cue from Weber and argued that human action involves cultural elements such as norms, values, and beliefs; situational factors such as peer pressure; known goals that are informed by both cultural and situational factors; and choices about means and ends that are likewise influenced.

Contemporary theorists, such as Anthony Giddens, see this complexity even more than Parsons. Giddens wants to get rid of the concepts of structure and agency entirely. He feels that they are false dichotomies, created to explain away the complexity of human practice. Giddens (1986) says that, “Human social activities,

like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive” (p. 2). It’s like the chicken and egg question. In some ways, it’s a silly question: When you have the egg, you have the chicken. They are one and the same, just in different phases. So, it’s a bit like this: social actors produce social reality, but the mere fact that you have “social actors” presumes an already existent social world. For example, you reproduce gender in all your actions, but in doing so, you are also producing the very conditions under which gender can exist at all. If we stop producing gender, the conditions under which gender can exist go away, too. In other words, structure and agency exist in the same moment, in the same actions, and they mutually constitute one another. Neither Giddens nor Parsons represents extensions of Weber’s theory *per se*, but they do capture the complexity that troubled Weber. For Weber, there aren’t any simple explanations.

Weber in Review

- Max Weber was born on April 21, 1865, in Erfurt, Germany (Prussia). His father, Max, was a typical bourgeois politician of the time; he was a man-about-town, drinking and making deals. His mother, Helene Fallenstein, was a devoutly religious (Calvinist) woman who had been sexually abused as a teen by an older friend of her parents. The elder Max and Helene were ill-suited for one another, which created constant strain in the Weber household. The young Weber was exposed to many of the prominent thinkers and power brokers of the day, as well as his mother’s strict Calvinist upbringing.
- Young Weber was a voracious reader, having extensive knowledge of the Greek classics as a young boy and being fluent in such philosophers as Kant, Goethe, and Spinoza before entering college. In 1882, Weber entered the University of Heidelberg, where he studied law. By all accounts, Weber was the typical fraternity member, spending a good deal of time drinking beer and fencing.
- After a year’s military service in 1883, Weber returned to school at the University of Berlin. While at Berlin, he completed his dissertation (“The History of Trading Companies in the Middle Ages”), wrote a postdoctoral thesis (“Roman Agrarian History”), and several other works on the plight of East Elbian farm workers, the longest of which was 900 pages. During this time, he also worked as a junior lawyer and lectured at the university.
- In 1893, Weber married Marianne Schnitger, his cousin. No children were born of this union. Weber continued to publish and in 1896 he returned to Heidelberg to become Professor of Economics. While at Heidelberg, Max and Marianne’s home became a meeting place for the city’s intellectual community. Marianne was active in these meetings, which at times became significant discussions of gender and women’s rights. Georg Simmel frequently attended. During this time, Weber worked as professor, lawyer, and public servant.

- In 1897, Weber suffered a complete emotional and mental breakdown. He was unable to work and would sit staring out the window for hours on end. Weber was unable to write again until 1903; he left the university and didn't teach again for almost 20 years.
- During his convalescence, Weber read the works of Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert. Weber became convinced that values and research should be kept separate; and his writings, which had been more historical and legal, took on a sociological point of view. After his breakdown, Weber wrote the majority of the works that he is best known for: his methodological writings date from this period (now found in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*), as well as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *The Sociology of Religion*, *The Religion of China*, *The Religion of India*, and *Ancient Judaism*. (Several of these weren't finished until later, but were begun during this time.)
- During WWI, Weber administered a hospital in Heidelberg. As a German nationalist, Weber initially supported the war effort but eventually became critical of it.
- In 1918, Weber accepted a position at the University of Vienna, where he once again began to teach. He started working on *Economy and Society*, which was to be the definitive outline of interpretive sociology. His *General Economic History* came from lectures given during this time.
- On June 14, 1920, Max Weber died of pneumonia.

The Perspective: Complex Sociology

An "objective" analysis of cultural events, which proceeds according to the thesis that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality of "laws," is meaningless. . . . It is meaningless . . . because the knowledge of social laws is not knowledge of social reality but is rather one of the various aids used by our minds for attaining this end. (Weber, 1949, p. 80)

Problems with social science: Much of Weber's concern about social science finds its roots in the idea of **culture**. Weber takes seriously the notion of culture. He doesn't see it as an epiphenomenon as Marx did, nor does he see it as the most important requisite function like Durkheim, nor is he captivated by the tension between objective and subjective culture as was Simmel. Rather, Weber sees culture as a historical process that at times leads social change and at others simply reinforces it. Culture for Weber (1949) is a value concept: "Empirical reality becomes 'culture' to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas" (p. 76). He sees culture as creating intrinsic difficulties for a

Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values. (Weber, 1949, p. 76)

scientific sociology, as introducing complexity around the issues of stratification and oppression, and as always influencing the subjective value orientation of social actors.

Weber's view of culture is not determinative—he doesn't see culture as determining human action. According to Weber, people are very much motivated by economic and cultural interests. But culture can act like a switch on railroad tracks and actually change the course of the train: "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern men's conduct. Yet 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" (Weber, 1948, p. 280).

In all his writings, Weber is interested in explaining the relationships among cultural values and beliefs (generally expressed in religion), social structure (overwhelmingly informed by the economy), and the psychological orientations of the actors. None of these elements is particularly determinative for Weber. One of the tasks, then, of Weberian sociology is to *historically explain* which factor is more critical at any given time and why, rather than predicting an outcome. So, for example, we could never have truly predicted what *African American* would mean in 2004 based on what *Negro* meant in 1950, but we can explain the historical, social, and cultural processes through which it came about. That being the case, the kind of knowledge that Weberians construct about the world is decidedly different than that proposed by the general scientific method.

Weber also sees another culture-based problem for researchers. He recognizes that to ask a question about society or humans is itself a cultural act: it requires us to place value on something. In other words, for us to even see a problem to study, we must have a value that helps us to see it. For example, it would have been almost impossible for us to study spousal abuse 300 years ago (it would have been difficult even 50 years ago). It isn't that the behaviors weren't present; it is simply that the culture would not have allowed us to define them as abusive, at least not very easily. And the same is true about everything social scientists study (and laboratory scientists, too, for that matter). Humans can ask questions only insofar as they have a culture for it, and culture is a value orientation toward the world.

So, if scientific knowledge is defined as being empirical and non-evaluative, then you can see why creating a social science might be a problem. Human reality is meaningful, not empirical; it is historical and thus concerned with unique configurations of values, and all the questions we ask are strongly informed by our culture and thus are value-laden. However, Weber is also convinced that a social science is possible, but there are certain caveats. Because human existence is a subjective one, creating an objective science about people is difficult. Knowledge about people must be based upon an interpretation of their subjective experience. And because people are self-aware free agents, the law-like principles that science wants to discover are provisional and probabilistic at best (people can always decide to act otherwise). So the kind of knowledge that we produce about people will be different than that produced in the laboratory, though Weber feels that objective knowledge is still possible. One key in creating this objective-like knowledge is that social scientists have to be reflexively and critically aware of their values in forming and researching their questions.

Creating objective knowledge: Weber argues that knowledge about humans in society can be made object-like through the use of **ideal types**. Ideal types are analytical constructs that don't exist anywhere in the real world. They simply provide a logical touchstone to which we can compare empirical data. Ideal types act like a yardstick against which we can measure differences in the social world. These types provide objective measurement because they exist outside the historical contingency of the data we are looking at. According to Weber, without the use of some objective measure, all we can know about humans would be subjective.

There are two main kinds of ideal types: historical and classificatory. Historical ideal types are built up from past events into a rational form. In other words, the researcher examines past examples of whatever phenomenon he or she is interested in and then deduces some logical characteristics. Weber uses this form in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In that work, Weber constructs an ideal type of capitalism in order to show that the capitalism in the West is historically unique. Classificatory ideal types, on the other hand, are built up from logical speculation. Here the researcher asks him- or herself, what are the *logically possible* kinds of _____ (fill in the research interest)? Weber uses this approach in forming his ideal typology of action.

Remember that his intent is to create an objective measure that exists outside of the content. Weber asked himself, what are the possible different kinds of human action? He came up with four. In Figure 5.1, these ideal types are pictured as a block to which the variety of complex behaviors can be compared. When we use this ideal typology, we are able to offer an objective explanation of human behavior.

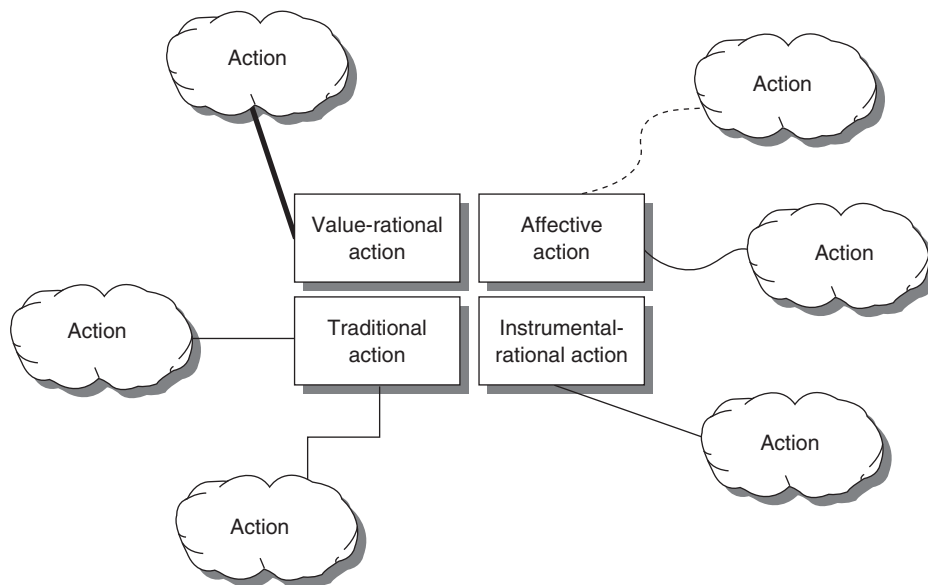


Figure 5.1 Social Action Typology

Instrumental-rational action is behavior in which the means and ends of action are rationally related to each other. So, your action in coming to the university is instrumental-rational in that you see it as a logical means to achieve an “end,” that is, a good job or career. **Value-rational** action behavior is that is based upon one’s values or morals. If there is no way you could get caught paying someone to write your term paper for you, then it would be instrumentally rational for you to do so. It would be the easiest way to achieve a desired end. However, if you don’t do that because you think that it is dishonest, then your behavior is being guided by values or morals and is value-rational. **Traditional action** is action that is determined or motivated by habit, and **affectual action** is determined by people’s emotions in a given situation. All of these different types of behavior can become social action insofar as we take into account the behaviors and subjective orientations of other actors, whether present or absent.

We can tease out an important element in Weber’s thinking from this ideal typology. Value-rational behavior is distinguished from affective action because Weber sees some semblance of self-aware decision-making processes in value-rationality. Values are emotional, but when we consciously decided to act because of the logic of our values, it is rational behavior. Emotion, on the other hand, is irrational and proceeds simply from the feelings that an actor may have in a given situation. According to Weber (1922/1968), both affectual and traditional behaviors lay “very close to the borderline of what can justifiably be called meaningfully oriented action” (p. 25), because they are not based on explicit decisions.

In his methodology, Weber also emphasizes understanding of the subjective meanings of the actions to the actors by contextualizing it in some way. Weber advocates the use of *Verstehen*, the German word meaning “to understand.” It is important to note that when Weber talks about meaning in this context, he has in mind the motivations of the actor. These motives may be intellectual in the sense that the actor has an observable and rational motive for his or her actions in terms of means and ends; or they may be emotional in the sense that the behavior may be understood in terms of being motivated by some underlying feeling like anger. So we can understand it when Sam hits John if we know that Sam is angry with John for cheating him in a business deal—the meaning of the action comes out of our knowledge of the motivation.

Weberian sociologists, then, will see the world in terms of ideal types (abstract categorical schemes), broad historical and cultural trends, or from the point of view of the situated subject (interpretive sociology). Weber’s causal explanations have to do with understanding how and why a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances came together, and his general explanation is always subject to case-specific variations. There are a couple of things that this implies.

First, Weber rarely gives us highly specified relationships among his concepts. He is more concerned with providing the historical preconditions for any phenomenon. Thus, it isn’t as easy to create a dynamic model of Weber’s theory as it is for Durkheim’s, nor is it as true to the theorist’s thinking to do so. What we *can* do is create a picture of the general historical processes that tend to produce an environment conducive to whatever issue it is we are trying to explain. The second implication of this Weberian approach is that the general theory will hold if and only

if there are no mitigating circumstances. In other words, Weber will give us a general theory, but it will only hold if nothing gets in the way. So, with religion for example, Weber may give us a general account of how ethnical monotheism evolved from magic, but we can see histories where it didn't work the way the theory implies. That is one of the frustrating things about reading Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*; yet, it is also what makes the account more accurate than many simpler approaches.

Rationalization: The historical and cultural trends that interest Weber the most, and continue to be a focus of Weberian sociology, concern the broad sweeping movement toward rationalization and rational-legal legitimation. Weber argues that one of the prime forces bringing about modernity is the process of rationalization. He uses the word **rationalization** in at least three different ways: He uses it to talk about means–ends calculation, in which rationality is individual and specific. Rational action is action based on the most efficient means to achieve a given end. Secondly, Weber uses the term to talk about bureaucracies. The bureaucratic form is a method of organizing human behavior across time and space. Initially we used kinship to organize our behaviors, using the ideas of extended family, lineages, clans, moieties, and so forth. But as the contours of society changed, so did our method of organizing. Bureaucracy is a more rational form of organization than the traditional and emotive kinship system.

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' (Weber, 1948, p. 155)

Finally, Weber uses the term *rationalization* in a more general sense. One way to think about it is to see rationalization as the opposite of enchantment. Specifically, an enchanted world is one filled with mystery and magic. **Disenchantment**, then, refers to the process of emptying the world of magical or spiritual forces. Part of this, of course, is in the religious sense of secularization. Peter Berger (1967) provides us with a good definition of *secularization*: "By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (p. 107). Thus, both secularization and disenchantment refer to the narrowing of the religious or spiritual elements of the world. If we think about the world of magic or primitive religion, one filled with multiple layers of energies, spirits, demons, and gods, then in a very real way the world has been subjected to secularization from the beginning of religion. The number of spiritual entities has steadily declined from many, many gods to one; and the presence of a god has been removed from immediately available within every force (think of the gods of thunder, harvest, and so on) to completely divorced from the physical world, existing apart from time (eternal) and space (infinite). In our more recent past, secularization, and demystification and rationalization, have of course been carried further by science and capitalism.

This general process of rationalization and demystification extends beyond the realm of religion. Because of the prominence of bureaucracy, means–ends calculation, science, secularization, and so forth, our world is emptier. Weber sees this move toward rationalization as historically unavoidable; it is above all else the defining feature of modernity. Yet it leads inexorably to an empty society. The

organizational, intellectual, and cultural movements toward rationality have emptied the world of emotion, mystery, tradition, and affective human ties. We increasingly relate to our world through economic calculation, impersonal relations, and expert knowledge. Weber (1948) tells us that as a result of rationalization the “most sublime values have retreated from public life” and that the spirit “which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together” is gone (p. 155). Weber sees this not only as a condition of the religious or political institutions in society, he also sees the creative arts, like music and painting, as having lost their creative spirit as well. Even our food is subject to rationalization, whether it is the McDonaldized experience (Ritzer, 2004a) or the steak dinner that is subjected to the “fact” that it contains in excess of 2000 calories and 100 gram of fat. Thus, for Weber, the process of modernization brings with it a stark and barren world culture.

Legitimation: Another issue arises from seeing the social world culturally: legitimation. When you see things through a cultural lens, as does Weber, you realize that for society or a social structure to work, people have to *believe* in it. **Legitimation** refers to the process by which power is not only institutionalized but more importantly is given moral grounding. Legitimations contain discourses or stories that we tell ourselves that make a social structure appear valid and acceptable. The strongest legitimations will make social structure appear inevitable and beyond human control (for example, the essentialist arguments surrounding gender—women cannot think logically and men cannot nurture children because of the nature of their sex). Weber argues that all oppressive structures, and, in fact, all uses of power, must exist within a legitimated order.

A legitimated order creates a unified worldview and is based on a complex mixture of two kinds of legitimations: subjective (internalized ethical and religious norms) and objective (having the possibility of enforced sanctions from the social group [conventions] or an organizational staff [law]). Weber indicates that subjective legitimacy is assumed in the presence of the objective. Underlying both subjective and objective legitimacy are three different kinds of belief systems or authority (charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal). Legitimacy works only because people believe in the rightness of the system. So, for example, your professor tells you that you will be taking a test in two weeks. And in two weeks you show up to take the test. No one has to force you; you simply do it because you believe in the right of the professor to give tests. And that’s Weber’s point: social structures can function because of belief in a cultural system.

One particularly interesting type of legitimation that Weber mentions is *theodicy*. A *theodicy* is a vindication or legitimation of the justice and love of God in the face of suffering. The meaning of suffering or evil becomes a problem as people move from magic to rational religion. Magic is the direct manipulation of physical objects to bring about a desired end. Under a magical system, suffering exists simply because the proper ritual or incantation hasn’t yet been found to counteract it. Suffering doesn’t require an explanation *per se*; it is a natural part of the world as it exists. The only issue is its possible removal by effective practice. However, once

human beings posit a loving, all-powerful God, the meaning of suffering becomes problematic, particularly when the good suffer and the evil prosper. Under a purely magical system, good and evil don't have the same meanings as under an ethical god. Under ethical monotheism, the good are obviously on God's side, so why do they suffer? The explanations of this suffering are the legitimations of theodicy (for example, God allows suffering in order to purify our soul so that we can gain eternal rewards).

To think like Weber is to take seriously the complexities created by people living at the intersection of culture and structure. To think like Weber is to understand social action as culturally defined through different subjective value orientations of the actors. But it also means seeing those subjective orientations as the result of historical processes. Every person acts within a cultural context that is historically specific. This emphasis on history and the individual is what C. Wright Mills would later term the *sociological imagination*. Weberian methodology, then, places emphasis on comparative historical analysis and *verstehen* through the use of ideal types to reduce complexity. To think like Weber also means seeing the modern world becoming more rationalized and disenchanting. And, finally, to think like Weber implies that we understand that belief in legitimating systems is in back of every social structure and use of power. In general, we might say that Weber provides us with a cultural sociology. In the way I'm using it here, cultural sociology is as much an approach to sociology as it is a particular subject matter (culture) within sociology. That is, it's as much a way of thinking about social life as it is a thing to study. This approach is something that we might term "the cultural imagination." While Weber spent little of his time studying culture as such, he did see everything social and historical through a cultural lens.

I have divided the material on Weber into four main sections. Throughout all four divisions, Weber's concern for cultural sociology is a binding thread. I begin our discussion of Weber's theory with religion because he, like many other theorists, sees religion as core to society. As we've noted before, humans are linked primarily through symbols, and the strongest symbols we have are religious. "[T]here is no communal activity . . . without its special god. Indeed, if an association is to be permanently guaranteed, it must have such a god" (Weber, 1922/1993, p. 14).

Weber is particularly interested in the interplay between the culture that religion produces and social structures. In the first section on Weber's theory, *The Evolution of Religion*, he shows us that changes in social structure brought about changes in religion. Yet in the section, *The Rise of Capitalism: Religion and States*, he reverses that influence. We see that Weber argues that religion (in addition to the state) actually paved the way for the rise of capitalism. In *Class, Authority, and Social Change*, we move from a focus on religion to cultural processes in general. Weber argues that structural inequality is a complex issue, and that cultural legitimation and authority are key issues in bringing about social change. Finally, *Rationality in Action* addresses the issue of social organization through bureaucratic structures. We will see that using bureaucracies as our chief organizing structure yields some very interesting social effects, some of them cultural.

The Evolution of Religion

Evolution versus revelation: Historically, society in general has moved from magic to polytheism, to pantheism, to monotheism, to ethical monotheism. There are two basic approaches to explaining this movement: progressive revelation and social evolution. Progressive revelation argues that there has always been one god who is concerned with the way we behave. But because of our inability to receive the full revelation of God, he (and these gods are always male) had to progressively reveal himself to us. This perspective also posits a god who is bound to human history. In traditional Christianity, for example, humankind had to reach bottom through the revelation of the law before it was possible for God to reveal grace. Social evolution, on the other hand, posits a link between religion and society. Religion changes under this model because society changes. Religion and society are locked in a kind of reciprocal relationship. As one changes, it brings about changes in the other, because each is necessary for the other's survival.

Weber gives us a social evolution model of religious change. However, these two models are not necessarily exclusionary. It is possible that God works through history. And it is possible that part of humankind's preparedness to receive God's revelation is linked to society, since humans are social beings. The reason I say this is to let you know that you aren't faced with an either/or decision. If you are religious, you don't have to reject your religion in order to see value in Weber's theory. Weber is only concerned with the empirical elements of religious change. We can either believe that there are spiritual forces in back of those changes or not. In either case, our beliefs are based on assumptions we make about how the universe works. And, as is always the case, assumptions are never tested or proven.

From magic to religion: Weber is interested in explaining how ethical monotheism came about. Monotheism, of course, is the belief in one god. *Ethical monotheism* is the belief in one god that cares about human behavior. In terms of history, such a god is a recent occurrence. For much of our history, we believed in many gods and goddesses, and we didn't feel that they much cared about how we behaved. What's more, most of the gods and goddesses were quite risqué in their own actions. Weber's approach is to look through history and see what kinds of social factors were associated with changes in the way people thought about God.

Weber first recognizes that the movement from magic to religion is the same as the change from naturism to symbolism. **Magic** is the direct manipulation of forces. These forces are seen as being almost synonymous with nature. So to assure a good harvest, a magician might perform a fertility ritual, because seeds and fertility are all wrapped up together. *Religion*, on the other hand, is more symbolic. Let's take Christian communion, for example. In Protestant Churches, the bread and grape juice *symbolize* the body and blood of Christ. They *represent* not only the atonement, but also the solidarity believers have in sharing the same body. The Catholic example is a bit more interesting. While there is quite a bit of symbolism in the Eucharist, there is also what is known as *transubstantiation*. In transubstantiation, the wine and bread *literally become* the blood and body of Christ. Taking the sacrament *brings about* union with Christ. Through it, venial sin and punishment are remitted.

The reason I compare the Protestant and Catholic versions is to bring out this point of Weber's. In Protestant communion, there are only symbolic elements present. In the Catholic Eucharist, there are actual elements present that are effectual in their own right. Weber would argue, then, that there are magical elements present in the Eucharist. To say something like this isn't meant as a slight against Catholicism (or a slight against Protestantism, depending on your perspective). It is simply meant to point out that these things work in different ways. With the Eucharist, there is a direct manipulation of forces to accomplish some purpose, which is Weber's definition of magic. We can also see the complexity of the social world in this example. Weber argues that *in general*, there is a movement from magic to religion, from physical manipulation to symbols. However, real life is more complex. Catholicism shows us that due to a religion's specific history, it may contain both symbolic and magical elements.

Generally speaking, humanity moved from magic to religion due to economic stability and professionalization. To understand these effects, we can picture a small hunter-gatherer society. In such a group, everyone lives communally, the division of labor is low, and life is uncertain. The tribe is subject to the whims of nature: game may or may not be there and the weather may or may not have been good enough for the berries to grow. In an attempt to make their world more stable, they perform rituals before the hunt and at season changes. They perform rituals at childbirth or when they need to find water. These rituals constitute magical manipulations, and the people performing the rituals would be the same who are involved in the actual work. For example, we can imagine the men gathering before a hunt, perhaps painting themselves with animal blood or putting on masks and acting out the hunt.

Soon our tribe learns about horticulture and they plant food. They become sedentary and tied to the land, and their life becomes a bit more predictable. After some time, they learn how to use metal and how to plow the land, and they learn how to irrigate. From these small technological advances come surplus, population growth, power, and a different kind of division of labor. Rather than living communally, certain people are able to work at specialized jobs. Thus, the uncertainty of life is further diminished.

What we want to glean from this little story is how the type of economy can influence the development of religion. Early in our story, many people were involved in the practice of magic. Because people were tied to nature, their view of how things work was naturalistic and not symbolic. They were concerned with day-to-day existence: what mattered was getting food, water, and shelter. It was necessary for them to have a method of control that each person could use.

But as life became more predictable, people did not have to be as concerned with immediate sustenance, and tasks became more specialized. Some people tilled the soil; others planted the seeds. Some were in charge of the irrigation; others transported the harvested grain to the grinders. And those who had a knack for it became what Weber characterizes as the "oldest of all vocations," professional necromancers (magicians).

Three things happened as the result of the *professionalization* of magic: individuals could devote all their time to experiencing it, they increased their knowledge

surrounding the experience, and they acquired vested interests (their livelihood became dependent upon an esoteric knowledge). The experience factor is important in this case. Weber argues that ecstatic experiences are the prototypical religious experience. Religion always involves transcendence, the act of going above or outside of normal life, and ecstasy is a primal form of transcendence. Like Durkheim, Weber (1922/1993) argues that “ecstasy occurs in a social form, the orgy, which is the primordial form of communal religious association” (p. 3). For laymen, the experience is only available on occasion, but because the professional wizard is freed from daily concerns, she or he can develop practices that induce ecstatic states almost continually.

These experiences, along with increasingly available time, prompted the professional to develop complex belief systems. As a result, what had once been seen as something everyone could practice (magic) became part of secret lore and available to only a select few. Because the professional magician could afford to engage in continual transcendent experiences, he saw more behind the world than did others. The world thus became less empirical and more filled with transcendent beings, spirits that lived outside of and controlled daily life. The magician developed belief and ritual systems that reflected this growing complexity. In addition, professionals could consider their own thoughts and beliefs, and the very act of reflexive thought will tend to make ideas more abstract and complex. Reflexive thought by its nature is abstract because it isn't thinking about anything concrete. And because it isn't thinking about anything concrete, it can go anywhere it wants. Further, the connections among ideas that are “discovered” through this kind of thinking tend to be systematized around abstract ideas.

Let's think about sociology as an example of professionalization. In a very real way, everybody is a sociologist. We all have an understanding about how society works and what is involved in getting around it. That's one of the funny things about teaching an Introduction to Sociology course—most of the students have a “oh, I knew that” response to the stuff we talk about. But what do *professional* sociologists do? Well, because we get paid to do nothing but sit around and think about society, we have made things very abstract and complex. We use big words (like *dramaturgy* and *impression management*) to talk about pretty mundane things (picking out clothes to wear). And we've developed these ideas into some pretty complex theories that take years of education to understand.

Further, think about the book you are reading right now. It is the result of my thinking about other people's thinking (Weber's, for example). But it's really more than that. This chapter could not have been written right after Weber. No, what we have here is not only my reading of Weber, but my reading of other people's reading of Weber as well. And because I get paid to do this kind of thing, I can weave all this complexity into a systemic whole. More than that—and this is an important point for Weber—we have made it so that you can't understand sociology without the help of a professional. You had to pay to get this book, and you had to pay to get another professional to stand up in front of the class and explain this explanation of Weber. Thus, professionalization pushes for symbolic complexity because of practice, reflexive thinking, and vested interests (I have to make sociology complex to protect my job). This kind of process is exactly what created symbolic religion.

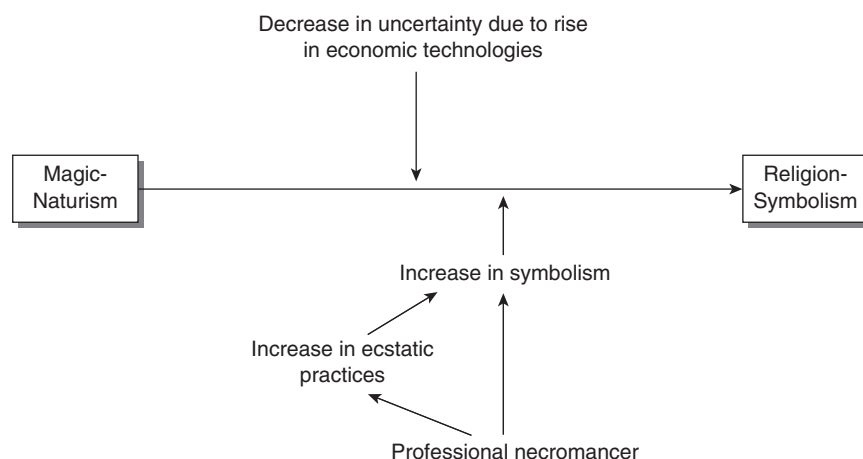


Figure 5.2 Evolution to Symbolism

I bring the ideas of professionalization and economic changes together in Figure 5.2. As technology allows people to be less tied by direct relations to the environment, they are less dependent upon magic for manipulating nature. As the economy produces surplus and creates more complex divisions of labor, necromancers can be relieved of other duties and paid simply to practice magic—they become professionals. These two factors work together to increase the level of abstract symbolism, which in turn moves magic toward religion.

From polytheism to ethical monotheism: In the beginning, religious practice was oriented around local gods and goddesses. These gods lived in specific locations and were connected to specific collectives. The next step in religious evolution was to place these local gods into organized pantheons. Organized pantheons are not simply clusters of various gods and goddess. Rather, in a pantheon, each deity is given a specific sphere of influence, and the activities and deities are related to one another.

Professionalization and symbolism play important roles in the religious evolution to pantheons. Professionals affected religion primarily through increasing the level of abstraction (analogous thinking, religious stereotyping, and the use of symbols in ritual rather than actual things—Weber points out that the oldest use of paper money was to pay off the dead, not the living) and creating coherent systems of knowledge out of localized beliefs. In short, as religion became more professionalized, it tended to become more rationally and abstractly organized.

At this point in our evolution, politics has come to play a very important role as well. One of the things the idea of God does is unite different groups into a single community. A kin- or tribal-based god provides the symbolic ties that small groups need, but at some point in our history we began to bring these different collectives together through conquest or voluntary association. Different groups, each with its own god, began to form larger collectives. In order to link these groups, a more abstract and powerful god was needed; one that could be seen above all other gods,

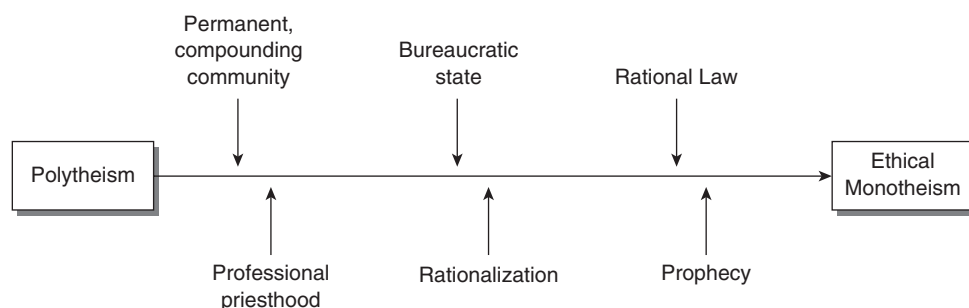


Figure 5.3 Polytheism to Ethical Monotheism

thus linking all the people. The gods that were highest on the polytheistic hierarchy began to be seen as less and less attached to the earth and more as part of the heavens. As populations with even greater diversity came together, more abstract symbols were needed to link them. These universal gods became seen as more powerful than all other gods. They became the god of gods and lord of lords.

This development toward monotheism was aided by the need of monarchs to break the hold that the priesthood had on the populace through the “multiplicity of sacerdotal gods” (*sacerdotal* meaning “pertaining to priests”). As long as there was a multiplicity of gods still linked to the daily needs of the people, there would be need for specific rites to approach those gods. In order to consolidate power, it was necessary for the king to eliminate those various paths, because each one represented a power that he didn’t control. Monarchs thus began to monetarily and politically privilege the universal god and his priests. And the idea of the one god was thus born.

Yet one more aspect needs to be added here: morality. The gods had typically never been concerned with the behaviors of their cults. Weber argues that ethical monotheism came about in response to the increasing rationalization of the state and the social control of human behavior. Because of the changes in the way government was organized, from traditional to rational-legal authority, a culture developed that proclaimed that individual behaviors should be controlled. Of course, this was in response to the needs of a large population under a centralized state: the larger and more diverse a population, the greater the need for rational, centralized control. And, according to Weber (1922/1993), this need was reflected in religion: as the state became more interested in the actions of the populace, so did the ruling god. “[T]he personal, transcendental and ethical god is a Near-Eastern concept. It corresponds so closely to that of an all-powerful mundane king with his rational bureaucratic regime that a causal connection can scarcely be overlooked” (p. 56).

In Figure 5.3, we still see the influence of professionalization. This remains an important factor in all areas of modern life. But rather than symbolization, rationalization now plays an important role in the movement toward an ethical god. As state governments become more and more bureaucratized and rational law becomes the way in which relationships are managed, people begin to see their lives as subject to rational control. Of course, today we feel this extended to almost every area of our lives. We not only sense that our bodies, emotions, and minds *can* be rationally controlled, we believe they *should* be controlled.

Religion contributed to this belief through the role of the prophet. Weber categorizes prophecy as two kinds: exemplary and ethical. The exemplary type is found in India and other Eastern civilizations. This kind of prophet *shows* the way by being an example. The emphasis in this case is on a kind of self-actualization. There is no real sense of right and wrong, but only of a better way. And neither is there a god to whom the individual or collective owes allegiance. The Buddha is a good example of this. The ethical prophet, on the other hand, is vitally concerned with good and evil and with bringing a wayward people back to the right relationship with the dominant god. Just as a centralized state needs and creates a single national identity and story, so the ethical prophet presents the cosmos as a “meaningful, ordered totality” (Weber, 1922/1993, p. 59). Thus, God and the state come together to rationally control human behavior.

The Rise of Capitalism: Religion and States

For Weber, there are three main factors that influenced the rise of capitalism as an economic form: religion, nation-states, and transportation and communication technologies. But, as with most of Weber’s work, it is difficult to disengage their effects. There is not only quite a bit of overlap when he talks about these issues, he is also interested in explicating the pre-conditions for capitalism rather than determining a causal sequence. So, what we have are a number of social factors that overlap to create the bedrock out of which capitalism could spring, but did not necessarily cause capitalism. Picking up from our last section, we’ll begin with religion.

The religious culture of capitalism: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is probably Weber’s best-known work. It is a clear example of his methodology. In it, he describes an ideal type of spirit of capitalism, he performs an historical-comparative analysis to determine how and when that kind of capitalism came to exist, and he uses the concept of *verstehen* to understand the subjective orientation and motivation of the actors. Weber had three interrelated reasons for writing the book. First, he wanted to counter Marx’s argument concerning the rise of capitalism—Weber characterizes Marx’s historical materialism as “naïve.” The second reason is very closely linked to the first: Weber wanted to argue *against* brute structural force and argue *for* the effect that cultural values could have on social action.

The third reason that Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic* was to explain why rational capitalism had risen in the West and nowhere else. Capitalism had been practiced previously. But it was traditional, not rational capitalism. In **traditional capitalism**, traditional values and status positions still held; the elite would invest but would spend as little time and effort doing so in order to live as they were “accustomed to live.” In other words, the elite invested in capitalistic ventures in order to maintain their lifestyle. It was, in fact, the existence of traditional values and status positions that prevented the rise of rational capitalism in some places. **Rational capitalism**, on the other hand, is practiced to increase wealth for its own sake and is based on utilitarian social relations.

[T]he capitalist economic order of today is a vast cosmos into which a person is born. It simply exists, to each person, as a factually unalterable casing (*unabänderliches Gehäuse*) in which he or she must live. (Weber, 1904–1905/2002, p. 18)

Weber's argument is that there are certain features of Western culture that set it apart from any other system, thus allowing capitalism to emerge. As we talk about this culture, it is important to keep in mind that Weber is describing the culture of capitalism in its beginning stages. In many ways, the United States is now experiencing a form of late capitalism. And some of the spirit that Weber is describing has been lost to one degree or another. Also keep in mind that what he describes is an ideal type.

Weber's first task was to define the *spirit of capitalism*. The first thing I want you to notice is the word *spirit*. Weber is concerned with showing that a particular cultural milieu or mindset is required for rational capitalism to develop. This culture or mindset is morally infused: the spirit of capitalism exists as "an *ethically*-oriented maxim for the organization of life" (Weber, 1904–1905/2002, p. 16). This culture, then, has a sense of duty about it, and its individual components are seen as virtues.

People do not wish "by nature" to earn more and more money. Instead, they wish simply to live, and to live as they have been accustomed and to earn as much as is required to do so. (Weber 1904–1905/2002, p. 23)

As the above quote indicates, modern capitalism contains principles for the way in which people organize or live out their lives. For example, you woke up this morning and you will go to sleep tonight. In between waking and sleeping you will live your life, but how will you use that time? From an even broader position, you were born and you will die. What will you do with your life? Does it matter? According to Weber, under capitalism, it does matter. How you live your life is not simply a matter of individual concern; the culture

of modern capitalism provides us with certain principles, values, maxims, and morals that act as guideposts telling us how to live. In my reading of Weber, I see three such prescriptions in the spirit of capitalism.

Weber begins his consideration of the spirit of capitalism with a lengthy quote from Benjamin Franklin:

Remember, that time is money . . . that credit is money . . . that money is of the prolific, generating nature. . . . After industry and frugality, nothing contributes more to the raising of a young man in the world than punctuality and justice in all his dealings. . . . The sound of your hammer at five in the morning, or eight at night, heard by a creditor, makes him easy six months longer. . . . [Keep] an exact account for some time, both of your expenses and your income. (Franklin, as quoted in Weber, 1904–1905/2002, pp. 14–15)

From these sayings, Weber gleans the first maxim of rational capitalism: life is to be lived with a specific goal in mind. That is, it is good and moral to be honest, trustworthy, frugal, organized, and rational because it is *useful* for a specific end: making money, which has its own end, "the acquisition of money, and more and more money." The culture of modern capitalism says that money is to be made but not to be enjoyed. Immediate gratification and spontaneous enjoyment are to be put off so that money can be "rationally used." That is, it is invested to earn more money. The making of money then becomes an end in itself and the purpose of life.

The second prescription is that each of us should have a vocational calling. Of course, another word for vocation is job, but Weber isn't simply saying that we

should each have a job or career. The emphasis is on our attitude toward our vocation, or the way in which we carry out our work. There are two important demands to this attitude. First is that we are obligated to pursue work: we have a *duty* to work. In the spirit of capitalism, work is valued in and of itself. People have always worked. But generally speaking, we work to achieve an end. The spirit of capitalism, however, exalts work as a moral attribute. We talk about this in terms of a work ethic, and we characterize people as having a strong or weak work ethic. We can further see the moral underpinning when we consider that the opposite of a strong work ethic is being lazy. We still see laziness as a character flaw today. In the culture of capitalism, work becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. More than that, it becomes the central feature of one's life, overshadowing other areas such as family, community, and leisure.

We not only have duty to work, we also have duty *within* work. Weber (1904–1905/2002) says that “*competence and proficiency* is the actual alpha and omega” of the spirit of capitalism (p. 18). Notice the religious reference: in the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the alpha and omega. Weber is again emphasizing that this way of thinking about work is a moral issue. Our duty within work is to organize our lives “according to *scientific* vantage points.” That is, under the culture of capitalism, we are morally obligated to live our lives rationally.

The rationally organized life is one that is not lived spontaneously. Rather, all actions are seen as stepping stones that bring us closer to explicit and valued goals. Let me give you a contrary example to bring this home. A number of years ago, a (non-Hawaiian) friend of mine managed a condominium complex on the island of Maui. In the interest of political and cultural sensitivity, he hired an all-Hawaiian crew to do some construction. He tells of the frustrations of having a crew come to work whenever they got up, rather than at the prescribed 8 AM. What's more, periodically during the day the crew would leave at the shout of “surf's up!” The work got done and it was quality work, but the Hawaiians that he supervised did not organize their lives rationally. They lived and valued a more spontaneous and playful life. In contrast, most of us have Day Runners and Palm Pilots that guide our life and tell us when every task is to be performed in order to reach our lifetime goals.

The third prescription or value of the spirit of capitalism, according to Weber, is that life and actions are legitimized “on the basis of strictly *quantitative* calculations.” Weber makes an interesting point with regard to legitimation or rationalization—humans can rationalize their behaviors from a variety of ultimate vantage points. And we always *do* legitimize our behaviors. We can all tell stories about why our behaviors or feelings or prejudices are right. And those stories can be told from various religious, political, or personal perspectives. Weber's point here is that the culture of capitalism values quantitative legitimations. That is, capitalist behaviors are legitimized in terms of bottom-line or efficiency calculations. So, for example, *Roger and Me*, a film by Michael Moore, depicts the closing of the General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan, resulting in the loss of over 30,000 jobs and the destruction

The development of the concept of the calling quickly gave to the modern entrepreneur a fabulously clear conscience—and also industrious workers; he gave to his employees as the wages of their ascetic devotion to the calling and of co-operation in his ruthless exploitation of them through capitalism the prospect of eternal salvation. (Weber, 1923/1961, p. 269)

of Flint's economy. The film asks about GM's social responsibility; but from GM's position, the closing was legitimated through bottom-line, financial portfolio management.

These cultural directives find their roots in Protestant doctrine and practice. But Weber doesn't mean to imply that these tenets of capitalist culture are themselves religious—far from it. What we can see here is how culture, once born, can have unintended and independent effects from its creating group. Protestantism did not directly produce capitalism; but it did create a culture that when cut loose from its social group, influenced the rise of capitalism.

The most important religious doctrine behind the spirit of capitalism is Luther's notion of a *calling*. Prior to Luther and the advent of Protestantism, a calling was seen as something peculiar to the priesthood. Men could be called out of daily life to be priests and women to be nuns, but the laity was not called. Luther, however, taught that every individual can have a personal relationship with God; people didn't need to go through a priest. Luther also taught that individuals were saved based on personal faith. Prior to this, the church taught that salvation was a property of the church—people went to heaven because they were part of the Bride of Christ, the Church. With this shift to the individual also came the notion of a calling. If each person stood before God individually, and if priests aren't called to intercede, then the ministry belongs to the laity. Each person will stand before God on Judgment Day to give an account of what he or she did in this life. That means that God cares about what each individual does and has a plan for each life. God's plan involves a calling. Luther argued that every person in the church is called to do God's will. So it is not simply the case that ministers are called to work for God—carpenters are called to work for God as well, as carpenters. One calling is not greater than another; each is a religious service. This doctrine, of course, leads to a *moral* organization of life.

This idea of a calling was elaborated upon and expanded by John Calvin. Calvin took the idea of God's omniscience seriously: If God knows something, then God has always known it. Calvin also took the "sin nature" of humanity seriously. According to the sin nature doctrine, every human being is born in sin, reckoned sinful under Adam. That being the case, there is nothing anyone can do to save him- or herself from hell. We are doomed because of our very nature. Salvation, then, is from start to finish a work of God. Taking these ideas together, we come up with the Calvinistic idea of predestination. People are born in sin, there is nothing they can do to save themselves (neither faith nor good works), salvation is utterly a work of grace, and God has always known who would be saved. We are thus predestined to heaven or hell.

This doctrine had some interesting effects. Let's pretend you're a believer living in the sixteenth century under Calvin's teaching. Heaven and hell are very real to you, and it is thus important for you know where you are headed. But there isn't anything you can do to assuage your fears. Because salvation is utterly of God, joining the church isn't going to help; neither is being baptized or evangelizing. Confessing faith isn't going to help either, because you are either predestined for heaven or you are not. And you can't go by whether or not you *feel* saved—feelings were seen as promoting "sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstition."

“Restless work in a vocational calling was recommended as the best possible means to *acquire* the self-confidence that one belonged among the elect” (Weber, 1904–1905/2002, p. 66). Good works weren’t seen as a path to salvation, but they were viewed as the natural fruit: If God has saved you, then your life will be lived in the relentless pursuit of His glory. In fact, only the saved would be able to dedicate their entire lives in such a way. The emphasis was thus not on singular works, but on an entire life organized for God’s glory.

Thus diligent labor became the way of life for the Calvinist. Every individual was called to a job and was to work hard at that job for the Lord. Even the rich worked hard, for time belonged to the Lord and glorifying Him was all that mattered. Everything was guarded and watched and recorded. Individuals kept journals of daily life in order to be certain that they were keeping good works. Their entire lives became rational and systematically ordered.

Further, if one was truly chosen for eternal salvation, then God would bless the individual and the fruits of one’s labor would multiply. In other words, in response to your labor, you could expect God to bless you economically. Yet, aestheticism became the rule, for the world was sinful and the lusts of the flesh could only lead to damnation. The pleasures of this world were to be avoided. So the blessings of God were reinvested in the work that God had called you to.

Taken together, then, the Protestant ethic commits each individual to a worldly calling, places upon her or him the responsibility of stewardship, and simultaneously promises worldly blessings and demands abstinence. This religious doctrine proved to be fertile ground for **rational capitalism**: a money-generating system that values work, rational management of life, and the delay of immediate gratification for future monetary gain.

Structural influences on capitalism: Thus, Weber argues that rational capitalism in the West found a seedbed in a culture strongly influenced by Protestantism. Yet there are other preconditions for the emergence of capitalism. I’ve illustrated these preconditions in Figure 5.4. They are divided into institutional, structural, and cultural influences, but these demarcations are not clear-cut. I’ve pictured them as rather shapeless, overlapping preconditions, as that’s how Weber talks about them. All of these processes mutually reinforce one another. With capitalism in particular, there is movement back and forth between culture and structure in terms of causal influence.

We’ve seen the influence of Protestantism, but in terms of institutions there also had to be a centralized, bureaucratized state, as well as significant changes in modes of transportation and communication. I will be spending far less time explaining these structural influences than I did the effects of religious culture. The structural issues are more clear-cut than the cultural ones (which is generally the case). But don’t let brevity fool you: these effects are equally important and you must understand how each of them works to comprehend the base for rational capitalism.

Nation-states are relatively recent inventions. Up until the nineteenth century, the world was not organized in terms of nation-states. People were generally organized ethnically, with fairly fluid territorial boundaries. They didn’t have nations as we think of them today. A *nation* is a collective that occupies a specific territory, has a common history and identity, and sees itself as sharing a common fate. The

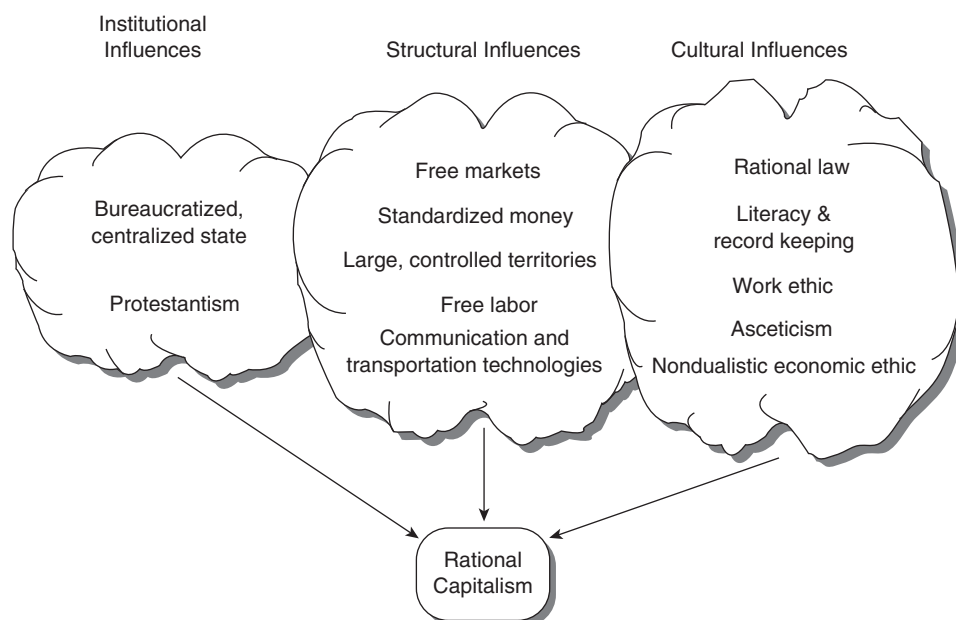


Figure 5.4 Preconditions of Capitalism

widespread use of the idea of a nation for organizing people was necessary for capitalism. Nations were responsible for controlling large territories, standardizing money, organizing social control, and facilitating free and open markets. All of these factors allowed for easier exchanges of goods and services involving large populations of people. These kinds of exchanges are, of course, necessary for rational capitalism to exist. Labor also had to be freed from social and structural constraints. Capitalism depends on a labor force that is free to sell its labor on the open market. Workers can't be tied down to apprenticeships or guild obligations, nor can they be attached to land obligations as in feudalism.

Along with increases in communication and transportation technologies, nation-states and Protestantism helped form an objectified, rationalized culture, wherein written records were kept, people practiced a strong work ethic coupled with asceticism, and the traditional dualistic approach to economic relations would break down. This latter issue is particularly important for Weber. In traditional societies, groups usually had two different kinds of ethics when participating in exchanges. There were restrictions having to do with ritual and fairness when dealing with group members, but people not within the group could be exploited without measure. Both of these frameworks needed to be lifted in order for capitalism to flourish. All business and loans needed to be rationalized so that there could be continuity.

Class, Authority, and Social Change

As we can see with capitalism, social change for Weber is a complex issue, one involving a number of variables coming together in indeterminate ways. Social change

always involves culture and structure working together, and it involves complex social relations. We turn our attention now to stratification and change. Again we will see the interplay of culture and structure as well as complex social categories.

Weber's understanding of stratification is more complex than Marx's. Marx hypothesized that in capitalist countries there will be only one social category of any consequence—class. And in that category, Marx saw only two types: owners and workers. For Weber, status and power are also issues around which stratification can be based. Most importantly, class, status, and power do not necessarily covary. That is, a person may be high on one of those dimensions and low on another (like a Christian minister, typically high in terms of status but low in terms of class). These crosscutting life circumstances or affiliations can prevent people from forming into conflict groups and bringing about social change. For example, in the United States, a black man and a white man may both be in the poor class, but their race (status) may prevent them from seeing their life circumstances as being determined by similar factors.

Weber also argues that all systems are socially constructed and require people to believe in them. Marx did say that capitalism has a cultural component that holds it together (if not for ideology, the proletariat would immediately overthrow the system); but true communism requires no such cultural reinforcement, because it corresponds to our species-being nature. For Weber, **legitimation** is the glue that holds not only society together but also its systems of stratification. Thus, for Weber, issues of domination and authority go hand in hand (in fact, Weber used just one German word to denote them both—*Herrschaft*). So, people must have some level of belief in the authority (culture) of those who are in charge and they must cooperate with the system to some degree in order for it to work. Though the concept may sound a bit strange, we could call this aspect of stratification cooperative oppression.

Class: But let's begin our consideration of these issues by taking a closer look at Weber's complex idea of stratification. Weber's definition of class is different than Marx's. Marx defines class around the ownership of the means of production. Weber (1922/1968), on the other hand, says that a "class situation" exists where there is a "typical probability of 1. procuring goods 2. gaining a position in life and 3. finding inner satisfaction, a probability which derives from the relative control over goods and skills and from their income-producing uses within a given economic order" (p. 302). In other words, Weber defines class based on your ability to buy or sell goods and/or services that will bring you inner satisfaction and increase your life chances (how long and healthfully you will live).

Weber also sees class as being divided along several dimensions as compared to Marx's two. Marx acknowledges that there are more than two class elements, but he also argues that the other classes (such as the lumpenproletariat or petite bourgeoisie) become less and less important due to the structural squeeze of capitalism. Weber also speaks of two main class distinctions, yet they are constructed around completely different issues, each with "positively privileged," "negatively privileged," and "middle class" positions. The **property class** is determined by property differences, either owning (positively privileged) or not owning (negatively privileged).

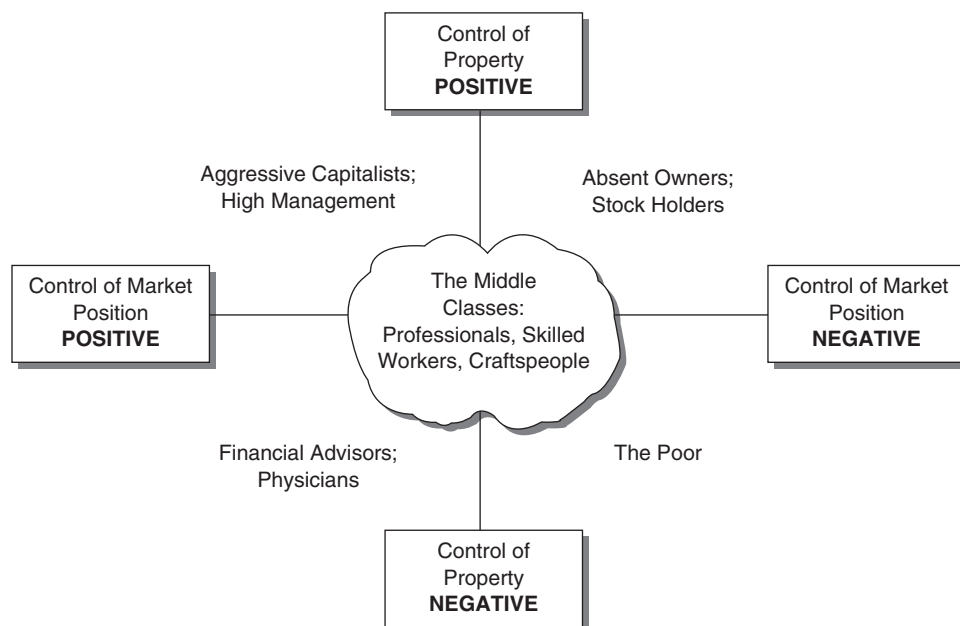


Figure 5.5 Weber's Concept of Class

Rentiers—people who live off property and investments—are clear examples of owners; whereas *debtors*—those who have more debt than assets—are good examples of negatively privileged. The middle property classes are those who do not acquire wealth or surplus from property, yet they are not deficient either.

The **commercial class** is determined by the ability to trade or manage a market position. Those positively related to commercial position are typically entrepreneurs who can monopolize and safeguard their market situation. Negatively privileged commercial classes are typically laborers. They are dependent on the whim of the labor market. The in-between or middle classes that are influenced by labor

market positions are those such as self-employed farmers, craftspeople, or low-level professionals who have a viable market position yet are not able to monopolize or control it in any way.

In Figure 5.5, I've given us a picture of Weber's ideas about class. We can see that there are two axes to class: property and market position. People can have a positive, negative, or middle position with respect to each of these issues. I've conceptualized this as a typology, because Weber spoke of people holding a position on both. I have also provided some contemporary examples in this typology. Today, those in upper management, such as CEOs, are not only paid large salaries,

they are also given stock options that translate into ownership, which places them high in both the property and market dimensions (they hold a monopoly with the skills they have). For example, *Forbes* magazine lists Jeffrey C. Barbakow of Tenet

A *uniform* class situation prevails only when completely unskilled and propertyless persons are dependent on irregular employment. Mobility among, and stability of, class positions differs greatly; hence, the unity of a social class is highly variable. (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 302)

Healthcare as having been the highest paid American CEO in 2003. He received about \$5.4 million in salary, plus he had stock gains of \$111 million. Even the lowest paid major CEO in 2003 received \$1 million in salary and owned \$28.2 million in stock. Weber's typology of class also allows us to conceptualize certain kinds of knowledge as a resource or market position and thus a class indicator. Those who monopolize such skills and knowledge in our society include medical doctors and other such professionals. Stock owners as well as Weber's rentiers use the control of property to attain wealth, and we find them in the upper right corner of the picture. Those who have little or no control over property and market are the poor.

Weber sees that holding a specific class position does not necessarily translate into being a member of a group. Unless and until people develop a similar identity that focuses on their class differences, they remain a statistical aggregate. In other words, the census bureau may know you are in the middle class, but you may not have a group identity around your class position. So, in addition to the property and commercial classes, Weber also talks about social class. His emphasis here seems to be on the social aspect—the formation of unified group identity.

Weber identifies at least three variables for the formation of social class. He argues that class-conscious organization will most easily succeed if the following criteria are met:

It is organized against immediate economic groups. There must be some immediate market position or control issue, and the other group must be perceived as relatively close. Thus, in today's economy, workers are more likely to organize against management rather than ownership.

Large numbers of people are in the same class position. The size of a particular group can give it the appearance, feel, and unavoidability of an object.

The technical conditions of organization are met. Weber recognizes that organization doesn't simply happen; there's a technology needed to organize people. People must be able to communicate and meet with one another; there must be recognized and charismatic leadership; and there must be a clearly articulated ideology in order to organize.

Keep in mind that these are all variables. A group may have more or less of any of them. As each of these increases, there will be a greater likelihood of the formation of a social class.

Status and party: But Weber sees stratification as more complex than class. Money isn't the only thing in which people are interested. People also care about social esteem or honor. Weber termed this issue *status*. Status, for Weber (1922/1968), entails "an effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges" (p. 305). Thus, status groups are hierarchically ranked by structural or cultural criteria and imply differences in honor and privilege.

Status may be based or founded on one or more of three things: a distinct *lifestyle*, formal *education*, or differences in *hereditary or occupational prestige*. Being a music fan may entail a distinctive lifestyle—people who listen to jazz are culturally

different than those who listen to rock. And there are positive and negative privileges involved as well: you can get a degree in jazz at my university, but not in rock. Homosexuals can also be seen in terms of lifestyle status groups. One's education level can provide the basis of status as well. Being a senior at the university is better, status wise, than being a freshman, and you have greater privileges as a senior as well. Professors are also examples of prestige by education. They are good examples because they usually rate high on occupational prestige tables but low in class and power. Race and gender are also examples of status founded on perceived heredity.

Status groups maintain their boundaries through particular practices and symbols. Boundary maintenance is particularly important for status groups because the borders are more symbolic than actual. The differences between jazz and rock, for example, are in the ear of the listener. Generally speaking, Weber argues, we maintain the boundaries around status through marriage and eating restrictions, monopolizing specific modes of acquisition, and different traditions—all of which are described in greater detail below.

The norm of marriage restriction is fairly intuitive; we can think of religious and ethnic groups who practice “endogamy” (marriage within a specific group as required by custom or law). But eating restrictions may seem counterintuitive. It may help us to realize that most religious groups have special dietary restrictions and practice ritual feasting. Feasts are always restricted to group members and are usually seen as actively uniting the group as one (the traditional Jewish Passover Seder is a good example). We can also think of special holidays that have important feast components, like Thanksgiving and Christmas here in the United States. And, if you think back just a few years, I'm sure you can recall times in Junior High when someone your group didn't like tried to sit at your lunch table. For humans, eating is rarely the simple ingestion of elements necessary for biological survival. It is a form of social interaction that binds people together and creates boundaries.

We also maintain the symbolic boundaries around status groups through monopolizing or abhorring certain kinds and modes of acquisition, and by having certain cultural practices or traditions. The kinds of things we buy obviously set our status group apart. That's what we mean when we say that a BMW is a status symbol. Status groups also try and guard the modes of acquisition. Guilds, trade unions, and professional groups can function in this capacity. And, of course, different status groups have different practices and traditions. Step concerts, pride marches, Fourth of July, Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, and so on are all examples of status-specific traditions and cultural practices.

When sociologists talk about Weber's three issues of stratification, they typically refer to them as class, status, and power. However, power is not the word that Weber uses; instead he talks about *party*. What he has in mind, of course, is within the sphere of power, “the chance a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of other who are participating in the action” (Weber 1922/1968, p. 926). Yet, it is important to note that power always involves social organization, or, as Weber calls it, party. Weber uses the word *party* to capture the social *practice* of power. The social groups that Weber would consider parties are those whose practices are oriented toward controlling an organization and its administrative staff. As Weber puts it, a party organizes “in order to attain ideal or material

advantages for its active members” (1922/1968, p. 284). The Democratic and Republican parties in the United States are obvious examples of what Weber intends. Other examples include student unions or special interest groups like the tobacco lobby, if they are oriented toward controlling and exercising power.

Crosscutting stratification: One of Weber’s enduring contributions to conflict theory is this tripartite distinction of stratification. Marx rightly argues that overt conflict is dependent upon bipolarization. The closer an issue of conflict gets to having only two defined sides, the more likely is the conflict to become overt and violent. But Weber gives us an understanding of stratification that shows the difficulty in achieving bipolarization.

Every individual sits at a unique confluence of class, status, and party. I have a class position, but I also have a variety of status positions and political issues that concern me. While these may influence one another, they may also be somewhat different. To the degree that these issues are different, it will be difficult to achieve a unified perspective. For example, let’s say you’re white, gay, male, the director of human resources at one of the nation’s largest firms, and Catholic. Some of these social categories come together, like being white, male, and in upper management. But some don’t. If this is true of you as an individual, then it is even more so in your association with other people. You’ll find very few white, gay, male, Catholic upper managers to hang around with. And if you add in other important status identities, such as Southern Democrat, it becomes even more complex. Thus, Weber is arguing that the kind of conflict that produces social change is a very complex issue. Different factors have to come together in unique ways in order for us to begin to formulate groups and identities capable of bringing about social change.

Domination in the most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action. Of course, not every form of social action reveals a structure of dominancy. But in most of the varieties of social action domination plays a considerable role, even where it is not obvious at first sight. (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 941)

Authority and social change: At the heart of the issue of stratification and social change is legitimacy, and here we see Weber’s emphasis on culture. In order for a system of domination to work, people must believe in it. Part of the reason behind this need is the cost involved in the use of power. If people don’t believe in authority to some degree, they will have to be forced to comply through coercive power. The use of coercive power requires high levels of external social control mechanisms, such as monitoring (you have to be able to watch and see if people are conforming) and force (because they won’t do it willingly). To maintain a system of domination not based on legitimacy costs a great deal in terms of technology and manpower. In addition, people often ultimately respond to the use of coercion by either rebelling or giving up—the end result is thus contrary to the desired goal.

Authority, on the other hand, implies the ability to require performance that is based upon the performer’s belief in the rightness of the system. Because authority is based on socialization, the internalization of cultural norms and values, authority requires low levels of external social control. We can thus say that any structure of domination can exist in the long run if and only if there is a corresponding

culture of authority. Weber identifies three ideal types of authority. (Keep in mind that these are ideal types and may be found in various configurations in any society.)

- **Charismatic authority**—belief in the supernatural or intrinsic gifts of the individual. People respond to this kind of authority because they believe that the individual has a special calling. (Examples of this type of authority include Susan B. Anthony, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Golda Meir, and Jesus—notice that it is people’s belief in the charisma that matters; thus, we can have Hitler and Jesus on the same list.)
- **Traditional authority**—belief in time and custom. People respond to this kind of authority because they honor the past and they believe that time-proven methods are the best. (Good examples of this type of authority are your parents and grandparents, the Pope, and monarchies.)
- **Rational-legal authority**—belief in procedure. People respond to this kind of authority because they believe that the requirements or laws have been enacted in the proper manner. People see leaders as having the right to act when they obtain positions in the procedurally correct way. (A good example of this type is your professor—it does not matter who the professor is, as long as he or she fulfills the requirements of the job.)

These diverse types of authority interact differently in the process of social change. According to Weber, the only kind of authority that can instigate social change is charismatic. Traditional and rational-legal authorities bring social stability—they are each designed to maintain the system. Charismatic individuals come to bring social

Charisma, on the other hand, may effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm. It may then result in a radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems of the “world.” (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 245)

change, yet charismatic authority is also inherently precarious. Because charisma is based on belief in the special abilities of the individual, every instance of charismatic authority will fail within that person’s lifetime—the gifts die with the person. Thus, every charismatic authority will someday have to face the **problem of routinization** (making something routine and thus predicable). Every social movement based upon charismatic authority—and Weber argues that they all are—routinizes the changes by either using traditional authority or rational-legal authority.

The case of the Christian church might give us insight. Jesus was a charismatic leader. When he died, the church was faced with the problem of continuing his leadership. Though somewhat a gloss, it can be said that the Catholic Church is based upon the traditional authority of the Pope and that Protestant churches are based upon rational-legal authority. You cannot study to become a Pope, but you can study to become a Protestant minister. As I said, this is a gloss: people do study to become priests, and ministers are perceived as charismatically ordained by God. So, these authority systems are mixed (as is always the case with ideal types). But their systems are *stabilized* through the use of tradition and bureaucracy.

Combining Weber’s ideas of class, status, and party with his argument concerning authority and social change, we can put together a theory of conflict and social

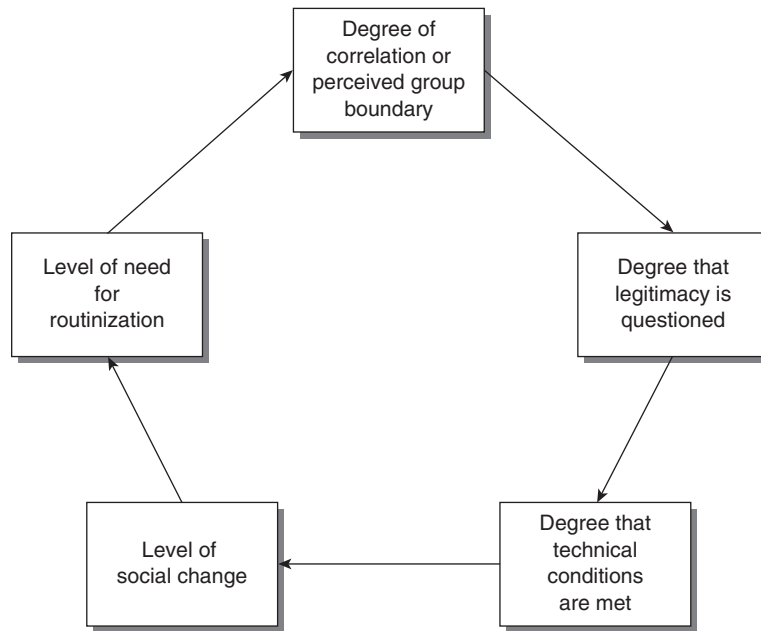


Figure 5.6 Weber's Theory of Social Change

change (see Figure 5.6). Social change will occur only if the legitimacy of the system of stratification is questioned. Conflict and change are likely to occur when there are clear breaks between or limited upward mobility in one of the systems—I've depicted this in the figure as "perceived group boundary." Groups will tend to perceive their boundaries when in close proximity to another competing group or when mobility is limited. It is possible for change to occur in only one of three areas, but that change will be limited due to the crosscutting influences of the other systems. In the United States, for example, many people questioned the legitimacy of the systems of race and gender during the 1960s and 70s. These systems are primarily built around and understood through status. So, while there have been some real structural changes, it appears that *most* of the change in race and gender systems is cultural—the status of each has been improved. (Please note the "appears" in my statement: this issue needs close **empirical** research.)

In a Weberian sense, significant social change will occur if and when there is perceived correlation among class, status, and power ("degree of correlation" in Figure 5.6). In other words, if people perceive that certain groups are high on all three stratification systems and certain groups are low, then they are more likely to question the legitimacy of the whole system rather than just one part. This *delegitimation* is particularly likely when the correlation is perceived as arbitrary. As legitimacy is questioned, the technical conditions of group conflict tend to be met. These include charismatic leadership, clearly articulated goals and ideology, and the ability to meet and communicate. Note that there is a reciprocal effect between questioning legitimacy and technical conditions: each will tend to reinforce the other. As technical conditions are met, the group will become more effectual in

bringing about social change. The degree of social change in turn will impact the need for routinization.

Weber argues that routinization will in the long run lead to a kind of stratification that again sets up the conditions for conflict and change. In this respect, Weber's model is more dialectical than Marx's, which stops with the advent of communism, but Weber sees conflict and change as ubiquitous features of every social system. For Weber, social systems will move cyclically through routinization and charismatic change. At different times, for different reasons, social groups will question the legitimacy of domination.

Rationality in Action

Historical shift to bureaucratic organization: To be human is to be social, and to be social is to be organized. Thus, organization is primary to what it means to be human. Human beings have been organized over time by different social forms, and these different organizational forms have clear consequences for us. In the not too distant past, we organized much of our lives around affective (emotionally based) systems, such as kinship. Kinship linked people through blood and marriage. In such organizations, people saw each other in terms of familial obligations and rights, which they felt as emotional ties.

But today we are organized through mostly bureaucratic means. From the time you were put in school at the age of five or six, bureaucracies have been organizing your life. You know how to stand in line, how to use time and space, and how to relate to people (the grocery clerk, the teacher, the minister, the insurance agent) as a result of spending most of your life in a bureaucracy. Even our dining experience has been strongly influenced by bureaucracy, thanks to McDonald's (Ritzer, 2004a).

Bureaucracies tend to rationalize and **routinize** all tasks and interactions. Tasks and interactions are rationalized in terms of means–ends efficiency, and they are routinized in the sense that they may be carried out without thought or planning or dependency on individual talents. Thus, each person and task is met in the same efficient and equal manner; personal issues and emotions do not have a place in a bureaucracy.

While bureaucracies have been around for quite awhile, for much of their history they were not the primary way in which humans organized. Certain social factors came about that simultaneously pushed out affective systems of organization (traditional) and set the stage for systems based more on reason than emotion. For Weber, these social factors are preconditions for bureaucracy, not causal forces. As these different features lined up, they created an environment ripe for rational organization.

According to Weber (1922/1968, pp. 217–226; 956–958), there are at least six preconditions for bureaucracy, and they don't necessarily occur in any specific order. These include increases in the following:

- the size and space of the population being organized
- the complexity of the task being performed

- the use of markets and the money economy
- communication and transportation technologies
- the use of mass democracy
- the volume of complicated and rationalized culture

All these factors created needs for more objective and rational social relations and culture, thus driving a society to use rational-legal authority and bureaucracy almost exclusively. As society became larger and spread out over vast spans of geographic space, it became increasingly difficult to use personal relationships as a method of organization. However, increases in population size and geographic space aren't sufficient to make bureaucratic organization necessary. For example, China was able to primarily use an elaborate kinship system rather than bureaucracy to organize most of their behaviors for many years. Other factors are necessary to push a society toward bureaucratic organization, such as increasing complexity of the task being performed. In England and elsewhere, this occurred through the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and high division of labor. The increasing use of money and open markets for exchange also increased the need for rationalized and speedy calculations, thus adding to rational culture.

Increasing levels of communication and transportation technologies created the demand for faster and more predictable reactions from the governing state.

Insightfully, Weber (1922/1968) says that with “traditional authority it is impossible for law or administrative rule to be deliberately created by legislation” (p. 227). Remember that traditional authority is based on history and time, so the only way a new rule or law can be legitimized through tradition is to say that it is according to the wisdom of the ages. Rational-legal authority, on the other hand, can create new rules simply because it is expedient to do so. So as states came into more frequent contact with one another and dealt with more complex problems, it became necessary to respond quickly to new situations with new rules, thus pushing forward a rational-legal authority and bureaucracy.

Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally domination through knowledge. (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 225)

Two additional forces created demands for rational and objective standards. The first was democracy for the masses, rather than simply the elite, which created demands for equal treatment before the law. Initially, the idea of democracy was limited to the educated and powerful. Including the masses created the demand for equal treatment regardless of power or prestige. This, of course, led to the idea that rules and laws should be blind to individual differences. The other additional social factor that pushed for bureaucratic organization was the increase in complex and rational culture. Due to the increases in knowledge that came with science and technology, a new social identity came into existence and rose to prominence—the expert, bureaucracy's manpower.

Ideal-type bureaucracies: Weber gives us an ideal type for bureaucracy. Remember that this ideal type is not intended to tell us what the perfect bureaucracy should look like; rather, Weber uses the ideal type as an objective yardstick against which we may measure different subjective and cultural states. Weber talks about bureaucracy

in a number of different places. But if we combine his lists, we come up with six important features to the ideal type of **bureaucracy**: an explicit division of labor with delineated lines of authority, the presence of an office hierarchy, written rules and communication, accredited training and technical competence, management by rules that is emotionally neutral, and ownership of both the career ladder and position by the organization rather than the individual.

Each of these characteristics is a variable; organizations will thus be more or less bureaucratized. For example, the first job I ever had was with Pharmaseal Laboratories. I worked as a lead man, which meant I kept the production lines stocked with raw materials and moved the finished product to the warehouse. After about six months of working there, I was promoted to management. During my week-long orientation, I was told about AVOs (Avoid Verbal Orders) that documented in triplicate any communication or disciplinary action. I was introduced to the Human Resources department and shown the employee files and where each of those AVO copies went. I was told of my span of control, given an organizational chart of the company, and a complete job description for myself and every person with whom I would have business. I was also informed about the company's internal promotion policy (the career ladder)—to get past the level I was at would require additional schooling and credentialing.

On the other hand, my wife's experience at a local firm indicates a more patrimonial and less bureaucratized organization. When she first arrived at this company, she asked for the organizational chart and job descriptions. She also wanted to know exactly what her span of control was and to whom she reported. But what she found was a 70-person company that was run on personal relationships. Most of the communication was not documented, there was no organizational chart or policy defining the span of control or communication, and there were no job descriptions. Thus, there are differences in the level of bureaucratization, even in a society such as ours. However, that company has changed over the years and has become more bureaucratized. These changes are due to increasing pressures for rationalization and objectification, coming from much the same preconditions of which Weber initially spoke. (A side note: It's good to keep in mind that all the theoretical issues that Weber, and our other theorists, brings up continue to be important social variables.

While we may talk about them historically, like the preconditions for bureaucracy, they continue to influence society and our lives. So, keep your eyes open.)

As we have seen, bureaucratic rationalization, too, often has been a major revolutionary force. . . . But it revolutionizes with *technical means*. . . . It *first* changes the material and social orders, and through them the people. (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 116)

Effects of bureaucratic organization: One of the things that should become clear as we move through the different theorists is that social processes and factors are not innocuous. For example, we see from Marx and Simmel that the use of money to facilitate exchanges in the end changes people. A good analogy might be putting gasoline in a car. We put gas in the car to make it run, but the accidental and almost

inevitable consequence is pollution. Bureaucracies have unintended and largely unavoidable consequences as well. They influence both the people in the bureaucracies and the social system as a whole.

Contemporary theorists point out that living in a society that organizes through bureaucracy can produce the **bureaucratic personality**. There are at least four characteristics of this kind of temperament. One, individuals tend to live more rationally due to the presence of bureaucracy, and not just at work. People generally become less and less spontaneous and less emotionally connected to others in their lives. They understand goals, the use of time and space, and even relationships through rational criteria. Two, people who work in bureaucracies also tend to identify with the goals of the organization. Workers at levels that are less bureaucratized tend to complain about the organization; on the other hand, management who exist at more bureaucratized levels tend to support and believe in the organization. Again, this isn't something that we just put on at work—we *become* bureaucratic ourselves.

Three, because bureaucracies are based on technical knowledge, people in bureaucratic societies tend to depend on expert systems for knowledge and advice. In traditionally based societies, people would trust the advice of those they loved, or those who had extensive experience, or those who stood in a long lineage of oral discipleship. Conversely, in societies like the United States, we look to those who have credentials to help us. Honor in modern society is given to those with credentials; age and experience are of no consequence. And, lastly, bureaucracies lead to sequestration of experience. By that I mean that different life experiences are separated from one another, such as dying from living. In traditional society, life was experienced holistically. People would see birth, sickness (emotional, mental, and physical), and death as part of their normal lives. Children were conceived and grandparents died in the same home. Today, most of those experiences are put away from us and occur in bureaucratic settings where we don't see them as part of our normal and daily life; such settings include hospitals, rest homes, asylums, and so on. The world has thus become tidy, clean, and rational.

Society is affected as well by bureaucracy. There are two main effects. The first is the **iron cage of bureaucracy**. Once bureaucracies are in place, they are virtually inescapable and indestructible for several reasons: they are the most efficient form of organizing large-scale populations; they are value free; and they are based upon expert knowledge. We've just seen that individuals within a rationalized society become more and more dependent upon expert knowledge; the same is true with leaders. Whether the leaders are in charge of political, religious, or economic organizations, they become increasingly dependent upon rationally trained personnel and expert knowledge in the bureaucratic information age. As we noted under professionalization, the experts themselves engage in secrecy and mystification in order to avoid inspection and secure their position. Further, one of the definitions of a professional is self-administration, which means that bureaucratic experts become a self-recruiting and self-governing class, existing apart from any other

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization . . . Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs. (Weber, 1948, p. 217)

When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of the existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own which is equally subject to bureaucratization. (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 224)

organizational control. Thus, neither the people ruled, nor the rulers, nor the experts themselves can escape the domination of the bureaucratic form.

There is one further factor to note: bureaucracies are value free, which means they can be used for any purpose, from spreading the gospel to the eradication of ethnic minorities. This implies that bureaucracies are quite good at co-optation. To *co-opt*, in this context, means to take something in and make it part of the group, which on the surface might sound like a good thing. But because bureaucracies are value and emotion free, there is a tendency to downplay differences and render them impotent. For example, one of the things that our society has done with race and gender movements is to give them official status in the university. One can now get a degree in race or gender relations. Inequality is something we now study, rather than the focus of social movements. In this sense, these movements have been co-opted.

Bureaucracies also accelerate the process of **credentialing**. Remember that position within a bureaucracy is achieved through diplomas and certification. It isn't supposed to be *who* you know but *what* you know that determines rank in the organization. That being the case, society needs a legitimated process through which credentials can be conferred. The United States uses the education system. But one of the effects of that decision is that education is no longer about education. The education system is used to credential technical expertise rather than cultivate an informed citizenry. Universities are thus becoming populated by professional schools—the school of business, nursing, social work, computer technology, criminal justice, and so on, and there is mounting tension between the traditional liberal arts and these professional schools. Many students express this tension (and preference for credentialing) when they ask, “How will this course help me get a job?”

The emphasis on credentials coupled with the American view of mass education and the use of education to give credentials has created **credential inflation**. Every year, more and more people are going to college to get a degree so that they can be competitive in the job market. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, we can get a sense of how this is working. In the United States, between the mid-eighties and mid-nineties, there was a 20% increase in the number of bachelor degrees, 37% increase in master's degrees, and 44% increase in doctorates. The result is that there are too many people with advanced degrees, which, in turn, decreases the value of those degrees.

Thinking About Modernity and Postmodernity

Bureaucracy, disorganized capitalism, and new social classes: The chief characteristic of modernity for Weber is the progression of rationalization. Due to such social processes as Protestantism, state formation, markets, money, democracy, population size, the complexity of tasks, and the level of abstract and rational knowledge, modern societies are organized more in terms of rational-legal than traditional authority. Thus, bureaucracy is the chief organizational form in modernity, increasing the levels of rationalization and routinization in society at large, as well as creating an iron cage for society and the bureaucratic personality. In many ways, then, Weber was disillusioned about modernity.

Weber would also argue that modern societies are complex entities. Class remains important, as Marx would agree, but modern societies are also noted for their differing and intricate status and power relations. Weber's emphasis on status comes, of course, from the place he gives culture in his analysis. Weber understands that humans are symbolic as well as material creatures. As such, we seek to be gratified through symbols and not just money. Weber also sees that social control is wrapped up in authority—the belief in the rightness of any system of domination. Thus, the exercise of power is based on cultural issues as well. Together, class, status, and power create a complex of social positions and societal control.

Weber was always interested in the relation between structure and culture and the interplay among class, status, and power. You remember that he saw culture leading change at one time and structure at another. Most often, history is the result of the dialog between these two forces. Within that dialog, the relative importance of and interaction among class, status, and power are played out. Social change can occur as the three are seen to correlate, or if the legitimacy of one or the other stratification system is questioned.

It is quite possible that as societies move toward what some call postmodernity, the issues and relative importance of class, status, and power change significantly. There are many factors that produce issues that influence these relations, but let's take a look at two of them: the increasing importance of symbolic gratification and life politics. Lash and Urry (1987), who conduct a Weberian analysis, argue that symbols and symbolic gratification become increasingly important for people 1) as the size and ability to organize of the working class decrease, 2) as the size of the professional and service classes increase, and 3) as ready-made (as opposed to socially emergent) cultural images and their meaning constitute a significant and growing social reality. In back of these three elements are what Lash and Urry term "disorganized capitalism" and the proliferation of media images.

The media we can understand and I'll come back to it in a moment, but disorganized capitalism needs some defining. Organized capitalism, the kind that Weber called rational capitalism, is characterized by increasing concentration of the means of production, distribution, and social reproduction. This type of capitalism brought large corporate and regional headquarters, massive factories, central distribution points, and workers living in concentrated areas within urban spheres. Disorganized capitalism, on the other hand, entails the de-concentration of the means and administration of production, commercial capital, collective consumption, and residential concentration of labor power. Capitalism has moved from large national corporations to larger international corporations to multinational conglomerates. Along with the movement of capital comes the movement of the work force—primary production moves from core nations to peripheral or third-world nations. Countries such as the United States are becoming less based on production and more based on consumption. For example, according to the Bureau of Labor statistics, the United States lost 2 million manufacturing jobs between 1991 and 2002. And during that same period of time, the number of jobs in retail trade rose by 4 million.

Not only did retail jobs increase while production-based jobs fell, but employment in the service (from 28 million to 41 million), government (from 18.5 million to 21 million), and finance/insurance (6.8 to 7.8) sectors all increased as well. These

numbers give us a picture of the movement from a class- (working) based economy to a service-based one. In such an economy, identities around class are increasingly difficult to achieve. And, as capitalist relations have moved and have become decentralized, the significance of large collectives (such as corporations, workplaces, and cities) has a diminished role in the process of identity formation. Markets and media fill this void and provide a diversity of identities from which the individual may choose.

These shifts in the economy also create demands for greater education and extended periods of unstable identity. We can think of the period between childhood and adulthood as being indeterminate and thus unstable. Between those epochs in one's life there are few institutional obligations. You're no longer utterly dependent, yet at the same time, you're not responsible for the institutions of society. In traditional societies, there was little time between being a child and an adult. In fact, children were seen simply as little adults. However, as the need for cultural training and socialization increased, so did the time before one would take on the responsibilities of adulthood. During these periods of instability, people are prone to play with symbols and identities. For example, look around your college campus at the diverse array of identities and symbols, and then consider a large corporation like IBM. What you will see is that the kinds of identities and the diversity of cultural symbols that IBM tolerates is very, very low when compared to the university.

The extended period between adulthood and being a child is, of course, due to the increasing demand for education and credentials (effects of bureaucracy) in a postmodern society. The professional and service sectors are based on knowledge and credentials, not on work skills. Credentialing is seen by some postmodernists as increasing the power of culture—because differences between people and access to jobs, social standing, status groups, and other valued social niches are determined symbolically, not materially. Moreover, credentialing expands the educational system, which in turn produces new sets of symbols that elevate the overall level of cultural production in a society.

Along with these changes, there has been a shift from emancipatory politics to life politics (see Giddens, 1991). *Emancipatory politics* is concerned with liberating individuals and groups from the constraints that adversely affect their lives. In some ways, this was the theme of modernity—it was the hope that democratic nation-states could bring equality and justice for all. On the other hand, *life politics* is the politics of choice and lifestyle. It is not based on group membership and characteristics, as is emancipatory politics; it is based on personal lifestyle choices.

We have come to think of choice as a freedom we have in the United States. But it is more than that—it has become an obligation. Choice is a fundamental element in contemporary living, due in part to the media (all print and visual forms of communication). Think of it this way: The basic reality for people is found in social events—face-to-face interactions. If I have an experience with Duke Power Company—let's say they cut down the trees in my yard without my permission—and I tell you about it, the telling of it is once removed from the actual event. And if I were to tell the story, I would emphasize those elements that back up *my* concerns, rather than those of the power company. Now let's think about what the

media does. If what is presented actually occurred in real life, by the time we see it in the media it has been removed many times over from the incident, especially if we are talking about global rather than local events. Each one of these levels is subject to its own politics and interpretations. That's why we can talk about the conservative or liberal media. But much of what we are presented with in the media is pure fiction or advertising, which further removes it from embedded, social reality.

In lifting out experience from its social embeddedness in face-to-face interaction, the media presents people with a vast array of diverse lifestyles and cultures. The plurality of lifestyles presented to an individual not only *allows* for choice, it *necessitates* choice. In other words, what becomes important is not the hard issue of group equality, but rather, the insistence on personal choice. In addition to mediated experience, the plurality of choice is also a function of a number of other influences, such as the de-institutionalization of expert oversight (think of the commercials telling us not only how to diagnose our illness but also what kind of medicine we need), the pluralization of life-worlds (there are many potential realities within our grasp), and the legitimation of doubt (science and education tell us nothing is certain).

What is at issue in this milieu is not so much political equality (as with emancipatory politics) as inner authenticity. In a world that is perceived as constantly changing and uprooted, it becomes important to be grounded in oneself. Life politics creates such grounding. It creates "a framework of basic trust by means of which the lifespan can be understood as a unity against the backdrop of shifting social events" (Giddens, 1991, p. 215). In some ways, we can see life politics as an extension of the feminist idea that "the personal is political."

A good example of life politics is veganism—the practice of not eating any meat or meat byproducts. Not only is eating flesh avoided, but also any products with dairy, eggs, fur, leather, feathers, or any goods involving animal testing. In the words of one Web site for vegans, veganism "is an integral component of a cruelty-free lifestyle." It is a political statement against the exploitation of animals, and for some it is clearly a condemnation of capitalism—capitalism is particularly responsible for the unnatural mass production of animal flesh as well as commercial animal testing. Yet for most vegans, it is simply a lifestyle, one that brings harmony between the outside world and inner beliefs, and not a collective movement to bring about social change.

What we can see through this discussion is that in postmodernity, material class becomes less important, while cultural issues become more important. Further, status and party are not single, focused social identities around which groups can form. Rather, status identities for more and more of the population have become like playful masks that we can put on and take off at will. Yet, the importance of status in identity formation has exceeded that of class, at least in terms of this way of viewing the world, and cultural signs, symbols, and images, as well as symbolic gratification, have become paramount. For many, politics has moved from group considerations of equality and political participation to individual practices designed to create a sense of personal authenticity in a shifting landscape. In terms of the bipolarization of conflict and the probability of social change, we can see that the

effects of bureaucracy and Weber's notion of crosscutting influences become more and more prominent as we move deeper into postmodernity.

Summary

- To think like Weber is to take seriously the ramifications of culture. Weberians focus on the historical, cultural, and social contexts wherein the subjective orientation of the actor takes place. To think like Weber, then, means to use ideal types and *verstehen* to explain how these contexts came to exist rather than others. To think like Weber also means paying attention to the process of rationalization and the need for legitimation.
- Religion began with the movement from naturalistic to symbolic ways of seeing the world. The movement toward symbolism and religion was influenced by increases in economic technologies and professionalization. Religion was initially practiced in kinship-based groups with local deities. These local gods became hierarchically organized into pantheons due to the political organization of kinship groups into larger collectives, and the abstracting and rationalizing effects of the professional priesthood. Eventually, these same forces produced the idea of a monotheistic god under which all the other gods were subsumed and finally disappeared. Monotheism became ethical monotheism in response to the need of polity to control behavior on a large scale.
- The cultural foundations of rational capitalism were laid by Protestantism. This religious movement (through the doctrines of predestination and abstention, and the idea of a calling) indirectly created a rationalizing, individuating culture wherein money could be made for the purpose of making *more* money, rather than for immediate enjoyment. The establishment of nation-states structurally paved the way for rational capitalism by creating a free labor force, controlling large territories, standardizing money, and protecting free global markets.
- Social stratification is a complex of three scarce resources: class, status, and power. These three systems produce crosscutting interests that make social change difficult and multifaceted. Large-scale social changes become increasingly likely only as class, status, and power are seen to correlate; the legitimacy of the system is questioned; and the technical conditions of organization are met. Since social change is led by charismatic authority, each change will need to be routinized through traditional or rational-legal authority, which, in the long run, will once again set up conditions for conflict and social change.
- Bureaucratic forms of organization became prominent as societies became larger and more democratic, as tasks and knowledge became more complex, as communication and transportation technologies increased, and as markets became more widespread through the use of money. The extent of bureaucratic organization can be measured through an ideal type consisting of six variables: explicit division of labor, office hierarchy, written rules and communication, accreditation for position, affectless (without emotion or emotional connection) management by

rule, and the ownership of career ladders and position by the organization. The use of bureaucracy as the chief organizing technology of a society results in the bureaucratic personality, the iron cage of bureaucracy, and social emphasis on credentials.

- A Weberian understanding of postmodern society focuses on the complex relationships among class, status, and party, with particular emphasis on the rise of the professional or credentialed class. Weber explicitly argues against a simple Marxian understanding of class and social change. For Marx, class in modern society would eventually devolve to only two classes who would face off over the means of production. Weber argues that social change is more complex, with cross-cutting influences from multiple class levels along with diverse status groupings and political parties. Postmodern theorists, such as Lash and Urry, argue that the class and status structures have become even more complex than Weber imagined, due to disorganized capitalism. Lash and Urry posit that postmodern culture takes on increasing importance due to disorganized capitalism, particularly for middle-class youth and for the expressive professions (such as flight attendants, newscasters, actors, models, and so forth) in the service class. This shift in class structure toward symbolic gratification is coupled with increasing differentiation of cultural images presented through the mass media to create an emphasis on life politics rather than emancipatory politics. Increasing differentiation of the class and status structures, along with the proliferation of media images, makes it increasingly difficult for political groups to effectively form, and personal choice has become more important than political change.

Building Your Theory Toolbox

Conversations With Max Weber—Web Research

All of our theorists are pretty interesting people, I think. But Weber was *really* an interesting person. Use your Internet search engine or review some of the recommended Weber Web sites to answer the following questions:

- Weber was truly an amazing scholar. Hints of his abilities showed early in his life. For example, what did Weber give his family as Christmas presents when he was about 12 years old? What kinds of books was he reading in his preteen years?
- Most scholars feel that Weber's family relationships played a role in his life and work. What kind of people were his mother and father? What was Weber's relationship to his parents? How is the death of Weber's father associated with his work?
- Some scholars think that Weber's relationship with his wife was indicative of some of his internal conflicts. How would you describe Weber's personal relationship with his wife? Speaking of his wife, what kind of person was Marianne Weber? (You might try putting her name in your Internet search engine.)

- Rather than being one of the founders of sociology, it appears that Weber wanted to do something else with his life. What kind of occupation or career did Weber want to have? How did he view academic work?
- At one point in his career, Weber visited the United States. What did he do during that visit and what effect did it have on his work?

Passionate Curiosity

Seeing the World (using the perspective)

- Weber presents us with our first critique of social science. He takes seriously the ideas of culture, value, and free will. However, Weber is still convinced that we can create object knowledge through the use of ideal types. His most famous one is bureaucracy. I'd like for you to create an ideal type with at least five points of comparison, and use it to think about the social world—use gender or another topic that interests you (perhaps one as important as “criminal behavior” or as mundane as “professor”). How did you form your ideal type (remember, Weber said there are two ways)? What were some of the difficulties you ran into? What do you think you can learn about the social world using your ideal type? For example, if you used gender, how do people vary from the ideal type? Under what external conditions do the variations take place? What do the ideal type and the empirical variations tell you about the cultural expectations concerning gender? What does this tell you about the way society is organized? (Notice I didn't ask what it told you about the person.) What are the drawbacks to using ideal types?
- One of the central themes in Weberian theory is rationalization (As a contemporary example, see George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society*). Take a look at your life: In what ways has rationality influenced you? Do you think your life is more or less rationalized than your parents' was at your age? Let's take this one step further. Go to a place of business, like a fast-food restaurant or mall, and observe behaviors for at least two hours. How rationalized were the actions you observed? Overall, do you think that life is becoming increasingly rationalized? What are the benefits and drawbacks to rationalization? How do you think Weber felt about this process?

Engaging the World (using the theory)

- Get a sense of the kinds of jobs you can get today with a college education and the jobs available with the same education 50 years ago. You can do this by using your Internet search engine, going to <http://nces.ed.gov/> and searching the data, or by asking your parents and grandparents. Explain your findings using Weber's theory. What do you think society can or should do in response to these changes? Using Weber's theory, do you think this trend will continue or abate? Do you think the purpose of education has changed in this country? To what level is education completely funded by government (that is, to what level is education free); why to that level, do you think?

- Think about Weber's ideal type of the spirit of capitalism. Are those traits more or less present in the United States today? Does this imply anything about capitalism in this country? Are we perhaps practicing a different kind of capitalism? If so, what would you call it?
- Weber gives us a robust theory concerning the rise of ethical monotheism. One of the interesting things that Weber's theory of religion tells us is that religion is clearly related to a political regime's interest in social control. Do you think there have been any changes in the structure or kind of religion practiced since Weber's time? If so, what kinds of changes? What kinds of social factors do you think are responsible for these changes (think about how Weber associated professionalism and economic changes with shifts in religion)? What, if anything, do these changes indicate about the state and social control?
- In addition to being spiritual centers, churches are social organizations. As such, Weber would argue that the type of authority and the concurrent organizational type that a church uses will influence the church and its parishioners. Using either your own experiences or by calling various churches in your area, what kind of authority and organization do you find to be most prevalent? Using Weber's theory, how do you think the church is being affected?

Weaving the Threads (synthesizing theory)

We are getting to the point in our studies where we are asking big questions and have the potential to create robust (strong and substantial) theories. It can be hard work, but it can also be exciting. When we move above the level of simply knowing what Marx said about capitalism, to the level where we are bringing together two or more theorists on the same issue, we are then beginning to create a theory that is robust enough to actually explain that part of society.

- Compare and contrast Durkheim, Marx, and Weber on the central features of modernity. What do they say makes a society modern? What problems do they see associated with modern society and modern lives?
- How does Weber expand Spencer's theory on the evolution of religion? Compare and contrast Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber on the origins and functions of religion.
- Compare and contrast Marx and Weber on the origins of capitalism. Can these theories be reconciled in any way? Do you think one is more correct than the other? Why or why not?
- Compare and contrast Marx and Weber on structures of inequality and social change. What does information does Weber give us about inequality that Marx doesn't? According to Weberian theory, what class did Marx miss entirely? Do you think that negates Marx's theory? How are Marx's and Weber's theories of social change the same and different? Can we bring them together to form a more powerful theoretical understanding of the conditions under which social change or conflict are likely to occur?
- Compare and contrast Spencer and Weber on the foundation of state power. How does Marx's theory critique both Spencer and Weber?

Further Explorations—Books

- Bendix, R. (1977). *Max Weber: An intellectual portrait*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (The standard Weber reference)
- Collins, R. (1986). *Weberian sociological theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (Systemization of Weber's theory by a prominent contemporary theorist)
- Turner, B. S. (1992). *Max Weber: From history to modernity*. New York: Routledge. (Explanation of Weber's theories of modernity)
- Turner, S. P. (2000). *The Cambridge companion to Max Weber*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (Excellent resource concerning Weber's works and influence)
- Weber, M. (1988). *Max Weber: A biography*. (H. Zohn, Trans.) New Brunswick: Transaction Books. (Definitive biography, written by Weber's wife)

Further Explorations—Web Links

- <http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome.htm> (Site maintained by Frank W. Elwell at Rogers State University; site specifically oriented toward undergraduates and contains good explanations of some of Weber's concepts)
- <http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/sociosite/topics/weber.html> (Internet resource for Weber's writings; some of the pages are in German)

Further Explorations—Web Links: Intellectual Influences on Max Weber

As a well-read individual, Weber was influenced by many thinkers. Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert both influenced Weber's work, but, unfortunately, at this time there are no helpful Web sites for either theorist. Two other important influences were Karl Marx, whose Web sites were noted previously, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

- Friedrich Nietzsche:** <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/> (Site maintained by Stanford University; contains extensive information on Nietzsche's life and work)
- Karl Marx:** http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx (Site maintained by Wikipedia Internet Encyclopedia; Marx's life, theory, and influences; additional links also provided)