

Max Weber

Weber is often regarded as the most important classical sociological theorist since he investigated many areas and since his approach and methods guide much later sociological analysis. Like Marx, Weber had a wide ranging set of interests: politics, history, language, religion, law, economics, and administration, in addition to sociology. His historical and economic analysis does not provide as elaborate or as systematic a model of capitalism and capitalist development as does that of Marx. But the scope of his analysis ranges more widely than that of Marx; it examines broad historical changes, the origins of capitalism, the development of capitalism, political issues, the nature of a future society, and concepts and approaches that Marx downplayed – religion, ideas, values, meaning, and social action.

In the view of some, Weber may have spent his life having a posthumous dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx. This dialogue concerned (i) economic determinism or the extent to which developments are rooted in the material base, and (ii) the extent to which economic factors alone can be considered at the root of social structure. At the same time, the differences between Weber and Marx should not be overstated.

Weber's analysis had similar scope to that of Marx, and he came from a similar historical, German tradition of thought, examining many of the same topics as Marx. Many contemporary sociologists think of Weber as complementing Marx, examining issues that Marx thought less important, providing a way of thinking about the individual within a structural approach, and laying out a sociological methodology. Weber's writing had an influence on structural functionalism, critical theory, some of

the social interaction approaches, and much contemporary sociological theory, including some Marxist approaches that use ideas from Weber.

2. Structure, History and Sociology

The historical, economic, and political analyses of Marx and Weber is largely structuralist. That is, they attempted to understand the large structures and institutions that affect the lives of people, and how these changed over time and space. For Marx, these were primarily economic structures – involving factors such as the development of the productive forces and ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. For Weber, the economic order was of paramount importance in determining the precise position of different communities but other important structures such as religion, ideas, status, and bureaucracy could influence people's actions in ways not directly derivative from purely 'economic' interests. In particular, for Weber "rational bureaucracy, rather than class struggle, was the most significant factor.

Marx had little concern over the division of knowledge into different academic disciplines and developed a social theory with widespread applications in the political realm. In contrast, Weber adopted a more academic approach, helping to establish sociology as an academic discipline. Weber realized that the structures of society are both historical and sociological, and described the the distinction between these Weber as follows:

Sociology seeks to formulate type concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical processes. This distinguishes it from history, which is oriented to the causal analysis and explanation of the individual actions,

structures, and personalities possessing cultural significance. ... [The ideal procedure is to make] the sure imputation of individual concrete events occurring in historical reality to *concrete, historically* given causes through the study of precise empirical data which have been selected from specific points of view." (Ritzer, 3rd edition, pp. 112-114)

In adopting this method, Weber was an historical sociologist. Weber considered the study and examination of empirical data necessary and these data must be carefully selected and interpreted. Out of this, a sociologist develops concepts and "generalized uniformities of empirical processes." Sociology is more than description of events and as Ritzer (p. 114) notes

history is composed of unique empirical events; there can be no generalizations at the empirical level. Sociologists must, therefore, separate the empirical world from the conceptual universe that they construct. The concepts can never completely capture the empirical world, but they can be used as heuristic tools for gaining a better understanding of reality.

One example of how Weber does this is contained in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Compared with Marx, Weber was less attracted to the idea of "laws" by which society can be described, and was less concerned with constructing an overall theoretical model of society and its development. Rather, Weber was impressed by the complexity of society, and the difficulty of understanding society as a whole. He uses many more concepts than did Marx and does not develop these into

a single, theoretical model. As a result, Weber's concepts and methods are usually more specific and less general than those of Marx but are applicable to a broad range of social issues.