Max Weber & Modernity: Crash Course Sociology #9

Crash Course: Sociology
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Take a second and imagine life just over five hundred years ago.

Say you're in Europe, at the tail end of the Middle Ages. If you had to name the biggest change between then and now, what would you choose?

Maybe the internet, or industrialization, or the incredible advances in health and medicine. Maybe you'd think back to Marx or Durkheim and say that it was the shift from feudalism to capitalism. These are all good answers.

But Max Weber had a different one. The most important change wasn't technical, or economic, or political. The biggest change, he said – the one that best distinguishes the modern world from the traditional one – was a difference in the way we think.

[Theme Music]

Like most of the theorists we've studied so far, Max Weber lived at the end of the 19th century, and the turbulent changes of that time influenced him as it did all the others.

He lived during the formation of the first German national state, and watching this process first-hand made him concerned with understanding modern society. So in his work, Weber examined some of the defining characteristics of the modern world, which sociologists have now spent over a hundred years studying and arguing about: He focused on ideas like rationalization, bureaucracy and social stratification. And when he saw where modernity was heading, he was really worried.

But to understand what he was so worried about, you need to understand how we got to modernity in the first place. And for Weber, the real defining features of the transition from traditionalism and modernity were ways of thinking. Not modes of production or social integration, but ideas.

To think traditionally is to take the basic set-up of the world as given. In other words, traditionalism sees the world as having a basic order, and that order is the way things ought to be. We can see this very clearly in feudalism and divine-right monarchies: The monarch is understood as having been anointed by God, and you owe them your allegiance regardless of whether they're good or bad at their job.

The question of whether or not they deserve the position never even comes up. But if traditionalism takes things for granted, modernity doesn't. In modernity, everything is up for grabs.

What Weber saw when he looked at history was that societies, and people, were becoming more rational. They were undergoing a process of rationalization. And Weber's definition of rationality included three specific things: calculability, methodical behavior, and reflexivity.

Calculability means that, if we know the inputs, we can know the outputs. Just think of a bowl made in a factory versus one you make yourself: Every single bowl comes out of the factory exactly the same, whereas no two bowls you make by hand are gonna quite match. Now, the reason that we know the outputs, if we know the inputs, is because there's methodical behavior involved – a procedure to follow.

In the factory, the method is in the machines. So the results are going to be the same, no matter who's pulling the levers. Finally, thinking rationally for Weber meant thinking about what you're doing, in other words, thinking reflexively.

You're constantly looking for new ways to improve the process, for new and better and more efficient ways to make bowls. So, traditional society is the society of individual artisans, each with their own process, which is how it's always been done. But modern society is the society of explicit instructions and standardized, methodical, procedures which are always being reflected on and improved.

So what caused this massive shift in how people think? What kicked off this process of rationalization? Weber gave here what might seem like an unlikely answer: religion.

In his book The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber argued that the transition from traditionalism to modernity began with the Protestant Reformation. For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church dominated Medieval Europe until, in 1517, a German priest named Martin Luther denounced corruption in the church. This set off a series of new religious movements that radically opposed Catholic dogma.

This was the Protestant Reformation. And it's in these new movements that Weber saw the origin of modern rationality. Catholicism, after all, was the basis for the traditional worldview.

Everything in medieval life – from the structure of the social order to the way you farmed – was the way it was, because God willed it. By contrast, in Lutheranism, you still have a divinely sanctioned place in the world, but for the first time, the question of how well you are performing your role became important. This idea – of personal responsibility – opened the way for another important figure in Weber's view of history: John Calvin.

Calvin didn't believe that God could possibly be concerned with anything that one measly little human might do. Instead, Calvin believed in predestination, the idea that your fate, whether you're saved or damned, has already been set by God, from the beginning of the universe. And there's nothing you can do to change it: you're either one of the "elect" or you're not.

So, how do you know? Through what Calvinists called a "proof of election." And here's where personal responsibility really comes in: The proof that you were saved was to be found in how you lived your life. So the point of your life was no longer that it was divinely appointed – it became a matter of how well, or how much, you work.

And, by extension of this logic, success itself became proof of election: If you're financially successful, then that was a sign that you were blessed by God! Suddenly you didn't just work until your needs were met, as you did in traditional society. Now the work was an end in itself, and you worked to accumulate as much wealth as possible, because wealth proved you were saved.

This is the sociological consequence of the Protestant Reformation that Weber studied and understood: It transformed a communal, traditional society into an individualistic, capitalist society – one that was focused on economic success. And I don't know if you've noticed, but modern capitalism is nothing if not rational. Think about it: You must work methodically in your calling.

You must constantly be reflecting on your work, in order to work more efficiently and productively. And you use profit as a calculable measure of your success. So rationalization gets its start in religion, around questions of how we work.

But Weber spent his career showing how all of society came to be organized rationally. In fact, if you've ever been to the DMV, you've seen what Weber argued was one of the biggest impacts of rationalization in society: the rise of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is a key part of the transition from the traditional to the modern state, and Weber identified six traits that make it both extremely rational

and very efficient: It's composed of a hierarchy of positions with an extremely clear chain of command.

This hierarchy is made up of a variety of very specialized roles and is held together by formal, written communications. The people in the bureaucracy accomplish their work with technical competence, according to detailed rules and regulations, and they do it without regard to the particular people they're serving – in other words, they do it impersonally. And I can't think of a better example of all these traits than the bureaucracy you see at the DMV.

The workers do their jobs competently and according to the rules, and they treat you just like they would treat anyone else, without regard for your personal characteristics, that is, impersonally. But there isn't only this change in the way the state works, there's also a change in the way the state is obeyed. In a traditional society, Weber believed that the state ruled through traditional legitimacy: people followed the king because that's how it had always been done.

But the modern state works differently: It rules through a combination of what we call legal-rational and charismatic legitimacy. Legal-rational legitimacy is essentially a belief in the system itself. You follow the rules because they are the rules.

So, the DMV employee doesn't ask for a certain piece of paperwork because that's how it's always been done. He does it because that's how the procedure instructs him to do it. If the manual were rewritten tomorrow, he'd do it that way instead.

But there's a problem with legal-rational legitimacy, and with bureaucracy in general: If it's all about following the rules, well, somebody needs to make the rules. That's where charismatic legitimacy comes in. You follow the commands of a charismatic leader because of the extraordinary characteristics of that person.

So the modern state is an apparatus of rules which are ultimately directed by a group of charismatic leaders. In the US, for instance, when we go to the polls every four years, we're making a choice about who's going to direct the bureaucracy, and we make that choice based on the characteristics of the people running. And here's another one of Weber's major contributions to sociology: The idea that the people who run to be leaders of our bureaucracies, do so with the support of political parties.

For Weber, political parties were a key example of social stratification, or the way that people in society are divided according to the power they hold. Weber didn't think that society was divided purely based on economic classes, or your relationship to the means of production, like Marx did. He argued that the system was more complicated, and consisted of three elements.

Like Marx, he included class, but he didn't think that classes had unifying interests. Weber also included political parties, defined broadly as groups that seek social power. And finally, he included status groups, defined by social honor, which includes things like respect and prestige.

All three of these things, Class, Power, and Status, affected a person's place in society. More importantly, each of these elements of Social Stratification could vary independently. So there could be a poor priest, say, who is high in social prestige, but of a low class.

Or a lottery winner, who is of a high class but low in status. Or a bureaucrat in a political party, who has some measure of political power, but not necessarily money or status. And then there are those who can turn their fame, or status, into political power.

Unlike Marx, Weber didn't take a particularly critical stand on stratification in society. But that doesn't mean he didn't see its problems. For Weber, rationalization was the defining feature of the modern age, and he was deeply worried about it.

Remember, rationalization is about three things: calculability, methodical behavior, and reflexivity. But it's really easy to lose reflexivity – to stop reflecting on your work or your role 8:27– and instead become locked in a calculated routine that becomes meaningless and unthinking. Weber worried that the systems that rationalization built will leave behind the ideas that built them, and that they'll simply roll on forever, meaninglessly, under their own momentum.

He worried that we'll become locked in what he called an "iron cage" of bureaucratic capitalism, from which we can't escape; our lives will become nothing but a series of interactions based on rationalized rules with no personal meaning behind them. This worry about meaning, and the concern for ideas and how they shape our reality, is one of the big influences that Weber handed down to future sociologists. On the micro level, these ideas were picked up by what's known as the symbolic interactionist paradigm and theorists like Erving Goffman.

Meanwhile, theorists like Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas took on the more macro version of these questions, looking at processes like rationalization and bureaucratization and culture more generally. We'll talk more about culture, and what it is, next time. But for now, you learned about Max Weber and his understanding of the modern world.

We talked about rationalization and the transition from traditional to modern society. We discussed bureaucracy, legitimacy, and social stratification in the modern state. And we saw why Weber was so worried about the modern world.

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