MAX WEBER: FINDING SIGNIFICANCE IN REALITY

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Foundations of Social Theory

Dr. Delaney
In my brief and early experience with sociology I have found that in order for it to have significance in your life, especially enough to choose the discipline of sociology as one’s major, a choice must be made. One must determine what aspect of sociology he/she can identify with, what approach you favor, and I think most importantly, how you can best convey data or information to your colleagues or peers. I have discovered an interest in Max Weber that has surpassed all other classical social thinkers. Weber was a German sociologist, a functionalist, and a strong advocate of interpretive social science; moreover, he was focused on objective, and ethical research. For me, I think that he is the best choice as a model sociologist. Using Weber as a role model will help to lead me down a path in sociology that will help me to focus my attempts at research and my conveyance of discovery in a direction that will best suit my abilities and predispositions. I have no doubt that my previously stated reasons for choosing Weber as a topic for my paper would be the very ideals that would lead any burgeoning young sociologist to choose Weber and his intellectual attributes as the framework for their very own perspectives and paradigmatic methods.

**Biographical Outline**

Max Weber was born April 21, 1864. He was born in Erfurt, Thuringia (a free state in Germany). Weber was born into a Protestant family. This was beneficial to Weber from the start since he was less apt to have to endure social pressures over religion. In the late 19th century and into the turn of the century, religious persecution was fairly common. The family that you were born into and their religious beliefs would often force individuals to renounce family tradition or face their own religious persecution. In Weber’s case, he was Protestant, so this allowed him religious freedom and thus, made his life a little easier in that respect. Unfortunately, being the late 19th century, there were few advances in the medical field and consequently sickness and disease was about as common as religious persecution (Gerth and Mills, 1958).

Weber’s mother, Helene, gave birth to seven other children besides Max. Two of those
children died before growing into adults. The two children that died would have, most likely survived had they been born in the present time. Weber himself often had to endure sickness; he would overcome meningitis at the early age of four (Gerth and Mills, 1958). Weber’s mother was very much a Protestant and would later be remembered most for her pious nature. One could infer from the nature of her children's many afflications that she would be extremely dutiful in the care of her children (Gerth and Mills, 1958).

Weber’s father, Max Weber Sr., was quite the opposite of his female counterpart. Weber Sr. was a right wing liberal. Since the Weber family lived right in a suburb of Berlin, Weber Sr. was in a position to gain political notoriety; consequently, Weber Jr. would grow up associating with prominent political figures and academics. “In his father’s house young Max Weber came to know such men as Dilthey, Mommsen, Julian Schmidt, Sybel, Treitschke, and Friedrich Knapp” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 3).

They say that opposites attract. I can’t say how accurate that statement is, but I can say that Max Weber’s parents were quite the opposite. This would lead to an eventual estrangement of the two parents. However, Helene's duty was to more than her children so she would serve as the epitome of a Hausfrau, caring for the children, Weber Sr. and his many important guests (Gerth and Mills, 1958).

As Weber was growing as an academic he failed to enjoy the routine and structure of the traditional learning environment. He would often show little respect for his teachers or his classmates. He apparently felt little regret about sharing answers during exams (Gerth and Mills, 1958). And in regards to his peers, Weber made this cutting remark:

Perhaps it sounds presumptuous if I maintain this position, since I am one of the youngest fellows in my class; however, this circumstance strikes one’s eyes so sharply that I need not fear that I am not speaking the truth if I state it in this manner. Of course, there are always exceptions (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 4).
He did, however, enjoy academic accomplishment at an early age. He was 13 when he wrote the historical essay, *Concerning the Course of German History, with Special Regard to the Position of Kaiser and Pope* (Gerth and Mills, 1958).

Although extremely intelligent and respected by his peers, Weber’s teachers would claim that he lacked moral maturity. Weber and his mother would become increasingly estranged based on religious differences or more specifically his *indifference*. This indifference was a result in his personal interpretation of the Old Testament after becoming well-schooled in Hebrew (Gerth and Mills, 1958). Mrs. Weber wrote, “The closer Max’s confirmation approaches, the less can I see that he feels any of the deeper stimulating influence in this period of his development…” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 5). “The worldly atmosphere of modern intellectual life drew Weber away from the philistinism of his father…”(Gerth and Mills, 1958: 6). With that, the estrangement from his mother, a lack of mutual respect with his teachers, and the fact that he was in a league of his own when it came to his peers, leads me to believe that the young Max Weber was a bit of a loner.

Upon concluding his primary education Weber decided to study Law in Heidelberg, Germany. He would also round out his education by adding history, economics, and philosophy to his repertoire of knowledge. His university days seemed typical enough. He participated in the previously stated topics of study, attended lectures on logic and was involved in a number of social clubs. He was involved in a theological club through a distant relative on his mother’s side (of course) that discussed controversial topics. He also fulfilled a legacy by being part of a dueling fraternity that his father was part of in his day. He looked upon those days favorably writing, “The usual training for haughty aggression in the dueling fraternity and as an officer has undoubtedly had a strong influence upon me. It removed the shyness and insecurity of my adolescence” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 7).

Weber had to do his time in the army when he was 19 and moved to Straussberg. This was physically difficult for him in the initial months since the dueling fraternity was the only physical
exercise that he ever performed. Later he would develop enough physical ability to be successful but never really enjoyed the military approach to training. The fact that thinking was not involved in any of his military training was what Weber disliked the most. To help him to endure his time during the day he turned to the bottle at night. His hangover would more or less make the drilling a little more bearable (Gerth and Mills, 1958). Later Weber would concede his point and agree that military training without thinking is effective (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 7). His experiences in the military were fairly limited. After returning from his year in the army, he would spend most of his time back at the university but he would take part in a couple of training exercises to include a maneuver in Posen. There he would gain a perspective on the “cultural frontier” that was the German-Slovanic border (Gerth and Mills, 1958). This event, I believe would become a precursor to his sociological perspective that developed later. According to Max Weber, “I simply cannot see what moral elevation will result from placing military professionals on a footing with a gang of murderers and holding them up for public disdain. War would thereby not gain in humaneness” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 8). Another short period of time that included a series of events that I believe was a precursor to and influence on his sociological thought was his time as, what he called, Ich Weltmensch (Gerth and Mills, 1958). Ich Weltmensch translated literally is ‘I human world,’ but what Weber meant was mediator. This mediation took place at two of his aunts’ houses. You see, his aunts were each married to professors at Straussberg. During this time, apparently it was common for the members of these two families to be involved in some fantastical experiences involving religion and supernatural occurrences of the like. This led to various disputes. That was where the mediation came in. Weber, who was empathetic and sympathetic to their needs, would find ways to solve issues within the home. Weber used particular methods for solving the disputes. He would say not to ask… “Who is morally right and who is morally wrong?” But, “… how can I solve it with the least internal and external damage for all concerned?” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 9). Though it would seem that the mediation of these discussions may have references towards psychology, I think that Weber was starting to identify interpretive sociological 'actions.'
Max Weber began his work with law in Berlin. And within the next few years he would write his thesis for his Ph.D., pass his second law exam in 1890 and meet his future wife. In 1893, Marianne Schnitger and Max Weber exchanged vows and were married. Soon after marrying, he would replace an economics teacher. Later in 1894 at Freiburg University, he became a professor of economics and, much to the dismay of Mrs. Weber, employed himself to large workloads and worked till early morning hours. Two years after getting his full professorship at Freiburg he was offered and accepted a chair position at Heidelberg. He had replaced Karl Knies as the chair of economics at the university. I would say that he had pretty much reached success at this point; he lived in Berlin, had a chair position, and his colleagues and associates were the same people that used to teach when he was a student at Heidelberg (Gerth and Mills, 1958).

In 1897, Weber’s father died. Prior to his death, Max's parents were having an argument. Normally, father and son would take sides but after Weber's experiences with his aunt and uncle in Straussberg, he found himself identifying more with his mother. This lack of any reconciliation before the death of his father, led Weber to feel some level of guilt and tension. Coincidently, soon after his father’s death he collapsed from a psychosomatic condition. He would suffer from this condition for the rest of his life. Doctors would essentially prescribe; exercise, cold water, and travel to relieve the symptoms from his mental condition (Gerth and Mills, 1958). Nevertheless, this disease would prove to be a detriment to his academics and duties. Weber made an attempt to comfort his wife by writing, “I know that sick or healthy, I shall no longer be the same. The need to feel crushed under the load of work is now extinct. Now I want most of all to live out my life humanely and to see my love as happy as it is possible for me to make her” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 12).

For the next several years, Weber struggled with his professional life. He would be forced to endure his psychopathological condition while maintaining his occupation as a professor. He wanted to leave the university behind since he was barely performing his duties. The university
insisted on paying him which made Weber uncomfortable. In 1897, he finally left his academic life behind (Bendix, 1960). He dabbled in some scholarly journals, introduced himself to Simmel’s work and in 1903 assisted the editing of the social science journal, Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik. He began work on one of his most famous works, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Gerth and Mills, 1958).

In 1904, Weber was invited to the Universal Exposition in St. Louis along with a few of his colleagues. Once Weber arrived in the U.S. he visited several big cities and was immediately sucked into the atmosphere of these cities. In his few months visit to the states, he had found inspiration and a new look for society. However one of his chief concerns was that of the issue of slavery, which was referred to as the “Negro Problem.” About this issue Weber writes, “I have talked to about one hundred white Southerners of all social classes and parties, and the problem of what shall become of these people seems absolutely hopeless” (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 17).

Weber’s mental condition challenged him throughout his life. Although Weber spent only a few years in universities teaching full time, he made an impact through his writings of essays and books. Many of his more esteemed works were authored after his departure from a full immersion in the academic world. He would continue to pursue part-time positions. Although Weber enjoyed his time at universities; his passion was for what he did outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, his teaching positions would stop him from really delving into his hobbies. An inheritance in 1907 allowed him to leave the dubiousness of the part-time world behind.

Many of the events that I focused on in my biographical content were, in my opinion, the moments that helped shape Weber as a man and as the theorist that we know him as. A more detailed look at this theorist's life would seem to be a digression on my part; so with regret, I am going to force myself to sum up the remainder of Weber's life.
After World War I, Weber accepted a teaching position at the University of Vienna. In 1919, he would become the chair of economics in Munich. It wasn't long into the second semester of his appointment that Weber was afflicted by pneumonia and died shortly after in 1920 (Parsons, 1947).

Throughout his life, Weber would make many contributions to the discipline of sociology. Many of his works are still untranslated; some of his work is actually notes of lectures that were taken by students and then compiled and translated (Parsons, 1947). In the section on his contributions I will talk about three of his works that are most renowned and that were actually translated; please note, that it is not my intention in any way to dismiss his other work.

**Influences**

More often than not, people are a product of their time. Max Weber was no different. I think that Germany and the state of the rest of the world at the turn of the century, and the late 19th century, was the biggest influence on Weber. Bendix, (1960) says: “One of Weber's most remarkable achievements was that he identified himself fully with these issues of German society but that he transcended their limitations by seeing them as incidents in a world-wide perspective” (p. 33-34). Weber's trip to the United States in 1904, and everything that he saw, had a major influence on his writing and his work as well. Gerth and Mills (1946) says, of Weber about his trip to America,

> In New York, he searched the library of Columbia University for materials to be used in *The Protestant Ethic...* During his travels in America Weber seems to have been most interested in labor problems, the immigrant question, problems of political management-especially of municipal government- all expressions of the 'capitalist spirit' (p. 16).

Although 'The Protestant Reformation' and the beginnings of capitalism didn't necessarily happen in Weber's lifetime; society, and all the results of 'The Protestant Reformation' were happening right before his eyes. Weber wanted to capture the essence of these changes, and he
did this in his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Perhaps, if Weber was born 100 years later he might have gone deeper into politics.

Karl Marx had a particularly profound influence on Weber. Marx's and Weber's views differed in many areas; specifically, in terms of the effects of alienation. Marx would have said that the capitalist economies were creating alienation. In contrast, Weber would have said that the problem was something different; his view was that rationalization spawned bureaucracy and in turn bureaucracy spawned deeper rationalization. This would be a perpetual cycle that led to a trap for workers and consumers in a capitalist society. Although, Weber's views differed from Marx's in many ways, that doesn't change the fact that the work of Marx was curious enough to influence the likes of Weber. “By using the same terminology as Marx, Weber wanted to emphasize that this process of concentration had occurred not only in the economy but also in government, the army, political parties, universities, and indeed in most large-scale organizations” (Bendix, 1960: 422-423). This is in reference to the concentration of the means of administration. According to Bendix, (1960) this is a term that both Marx and Weber used to describe the process of the workers losing the resources to run their facility as the organization grows in size; furthermore, it was one of the many ideas in which the two sociologists shared a common ground. Karl Löwith (1960) writes:

He [Weber] himself characterizes the difference between his own method and that of Marxism as the difference between an 'empirical' and a 'dogmatic' method. But the real meaning of his 'empirical' procedure lies only apparently in the advance from the necessary 'one-sidedness' of scientific observation to a scientific 'many-sidedness', by contrast with the dogmatic unequivocalness of a world-formula (p. 103-4).

This refers back to the idea that alienation, or depersonalization was not just affecting the capitalist societies but it was more of a problem that had reached global proportions. The fact that Weber studied many different societies and religions proves that he felt this way.

Löwith (1960) also writes:

Weber himself declared that here lies the real problem of culture – rationalization towards the irrational – and that he and Marx agreed in the definition of this problem but differed in its
evaluation. In his [Weber] 1918 lecture on Socialism which, in the political circumstances of the time, was a remarkable tribute to the achievement of the *Communist Manifesto*, Weber presented the so-called 'separation' of the worker (including the 'intellectual' worker) from the means of work (p.48).

Marx's name comes up quite often in Weber's works; in fact, there are entire books focused on the relationship of the two thinkers' theories and concepts. The key difference between the two was that Marx wanted to eliminate this 'separation' while Weber wanted to understand it (Löwith, 1960).

**Academic Contributions**

When Weber returned from the U.S. around Christmas of 1904, he finished work on his second part of *The Protestant Ethic*. After which, Weber writes his most significant works. This book as well as many of his works was not completed over one period of time. It was rather treated like a journal. He would write some here and there, leave it and then return to it, starting other projects in the meantime. Many of his works were left incomplete. During my discussion of Weber's work I will undoubtedly talk about his concepts and contributions to the discipline of sociology (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 17).

**Social and Economic Organization**

*Theory* offers the reader a sizable presentation of Weber's main concepts. This allows me to focus on his concepts in a more comprehensive manner throughout the next several paragraphs. Ultimately, it seems that this was his goal in part one of *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Weber (1947) writes, “An introductory discussion of concepts can hardly be dispensed with, in spite of the fact that that it is unavoidably abstract and hence gives the impression of remoteness from reality” (p. 87). He goes on to say that in order to make the concepts understandable in this context, some of the definitions have been simplified or changed slightly (Weber, 1947). This is not uncommon for Weber; in fact, he was often criticized for changing his mind. Talcott Parsons (1947) writes,
His was a mind which eagerly sought after broad generalization, however rigorous his standards of detailed scholarship, and early in his career he became absorbed in empirical problems of such scope as to be inaccessible to such methods alone. Part of the outcome of these dissatisfactions was the methodological reorientation, the starting point which was a devastating critique of the logical foundations of the historical school of economics (p. 6).

Without avail, I will move on to his first concept in which he defined.

Although Weber was adamant on the use of objectivity in research, his first concept that I will discuss was focused on quite the contrary. Verstehen is a term that when translated, simply meant understanding. This is the subjective idea where you attempt to fully understand the meaning of the social interaction and the meaning behind it as portrayed by the actors involved (Parsons, 1947).

To further understand this idea and the importance behind it, I will first define sociology and social action according to Weber.

Sociology... is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects. In 'action' is included all behaviour when and insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it (Weber, 1947:88).

By his definition, it is of utmost importance to employ verstehen and it is really the only way to come to a full understanding of the meaning behind the actors' actions. Weber classifies actions into 'meaningful action' and 'reactive behavior.' These two terms are fairly self explanatory, the former refers to actions that can be given meaning and the latter as a simple action that is a mere response to another action. In either case, the result of the empirical observation must be achieved with the use of what Weber calls, Evidenz. The translators of this work points out that there is no real clear translation of this concept into english words; however, I will point out that it refers to an end result of an observation. Whether the observer is using logical and mathematical methods or empathetic methods, the end result or product will be Evidenz. Also note that this would result in a clear understanding of the meaning of the action (Parsons, 1947). On the other hand, Weber does not deny that there are actions that are meaningless, such as that of reactive behavior. He used the term sinnfremd to describe not that at an action was
meaningless but that these actions were “devoid of meaning in so far as they cannot be related to an intended purpose” (Weber, 1947: 93). This purpose of course refers to his ever present means-end relationship.

Weber had postulated that there were different types of social action. These types were based on the probability that actions would retain a sense of uniformity in similar circumstances. He referred to this probability as Brauch, and translated it would mean simply 'usage.' The term that he applied to what would be considered the most rational or logical behavior used to meet a particular end was Zweckrational. An example of this would be: a person that wanted to do well on a test would study beforehand (Weber, 1947).

Another idea of Weber’s that deserves mention at this time regards the actor performing actions that are of his or her own free will. He refers to this as 'custom.' These actions are not based on external forces, they simply happen for many reasons but usually are within the actors best interests. The actor that is performing this type of action would be classified as wertrational. The other two types are affectual and traditionally oriented; they refer to actors performing from feelings or emotion and due to traditional behavior, respectively. Weber states that a lot of the day to day actions that we as humans perform often approach the realm of traditional behavior. There is so much structure in people's lives that many things become habitual and therefore become of a traditional nature (Weber, 1947). Weber had this idea that society was becoming increasingly rationalized. The way Weber looked at it was that rationalization was, more or less, positive and negative. His famous analogy is certainly relevant to his theory. “Iron Cage” referred to an inescapable prison of bureaucratic efficiency. Although this rationality helped to make things more efficient and at many times help society move towards progress, it led to the elimination of the thing that makes us most human... thought.

He anticipated a society of people locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another- from rationalized educational institutions to rationalized workplaces, from rationalized recreational settings to rationalized homes. Society would
eventually become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures; there would be no escape (Ritzer, 2004: 28).

Weber’s *Theory on Social and Economic Organization* is a theory but could very well be identified as a blueprint for a society built on a capitalist structure. He begins by discussing his basic concepts and moves from the individual relationship through to the characteristics of leadership and the influence on money. Weber talks of inflation and and the modern monetary system and the *Theory of Money*; in it, he defines the different types of money, from *paper money* to *restricted money* (Weber, 1947). He discusses the social relations of the process of production. Much of what he discusses seems to be rather objective in the sense that he speaks in a matter of fact manner. In his section on *The Expropriation of Workers from the Means of Production*, he uses the word expropriation. This seems to me that “modifying workers rights” is a necessity as opposed to something negative. Its something that has to be done in order to maintain some form of progress. He says that workers’ “rights to participate in management...[can] produce technically, if not economically, irrational obstacles to efficiency (Weber, 1947: 247).

Weber's concepts on bureaucracy and authority are some of his more famous ideas. This concept includes *Traditional Authority*, in his section on *Traditional Authority* he also discusses patriarchalism. This is relevant to traditional authority because an example of traditional authority would be a king or sultan; someone who gains power that has been handed down and enjoys power that has been present for generations. Patriarchalism falls into this category simply because its been around so long and still exists today. However, women have far more rights today than they did in previous decades. *Charismatic Authority* seems to me to be a thing of the past. This statement is placed solely on Weber's definition of this type of authority. “The term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber, 1947: 358). The last, but certainly not least type of authority that I will discuss is *Rational-Legal Authority*. This authority type refers to a
particular area of expertise maintained by a certain individual that enjoys this type of authority. An example would be our Sociology Club President. Within our club he/she enjoys authority. Outside of that club his 'sphere of influence' ceases to exist (Weber, 1947).

**Methodology**

Weber’s compilation of methodology essays is in my opinion is of vital importance. Edward A. Shils (1949) writes in the forward of *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*:

> The essays in this book were written, as all methodological essays should be written, in the closest intimacy with actual research and against a background of constant and intensive meditation on the substantive problems of the theory and strategy of the social sciences (p.iii).

In *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* Weber seems to take a paradigmatic approach in the compiling of the essays in this book focusing on ethics and logic overall, and how they can be applied.

In *The meaning of “Ethical Neutrality,”* Weber starts by talking about value-judgments (Weber, 1917:1). This is simply the idea of eliminating all bias from your research. In this essay, he talks not only about the importance of value-judgments but when to incorporate it into the many facets of academia; furthermore, when to minimize the use of value-judgment (Weber, 1917).

> Personally I believe that, in spite of this, what is right(in my opinion) should be done and that the influence of the value-judgments of a scholar who confines himself to championing them at appropriate occasions outside the classroom, will increase when it becomes known that he does only his “task” inside the classroom (Weber, 1917: 6).

Basically, Weber is saying that when you find yourself in social settings you will be challenged on your opinion and whether or not you are implementing value-judgment and non-partisan ideas just as certainly as in the classroom.

> Throughout Weber's essay on “ethical neutrality,” he discusses this idea in several settings, i.e. neutrality during research, in the classroom, and in a social setting. There are times
when one will apply this “ethical neutrality” and there are times when you may be bias. The latter would be referring to research in relation to what end the researcher is trying to reach (Weber, 1917). He also discusses his disagreement with other researchers’ findings on the matter. I have found through the reading of segments of this essay, the extent to which this idea can be applied. I have also seen how often one could mistake this idea of “a priori” reasoning with what would most certainly need to be evaluated with a more empirical method.

The second essay in Weber's essays on methodology is *Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy*. Weber attempts to write in a manner that will allow a reader like myself to understand the topic. This is evident in the first paragraph of the essay when Weber writes, “this occasion provides the opportunity to cast some light on the nature of the “social sciences” as we understand them, in such a manner that it can be useful, if not to the specialist, than to the reader who is more remote from actual scientific work” (Weber, 1917: 50). And this is not far from the truth insofar as Weber's perspective on human interaction is most clear to me after reading the following statement out of this essay, “All serious reflection about the elements of meaningful human conduct is oriented primarily in terms of the categories “end” and “means” (Weber, 1917: 52). He goes on to say that this desire for a particular “end” and how a person decides to achieve it can be studied empirically; moreover, we can predict the success of achieving that “end” by looking at whether or not the “means” were appropriate or not (Weber, 1917). This leads to the idea of interpreting human interaction and developing causal laws, or what we might use to predict behavior; furthermore, Weber elaborates by telling us that it isn't necessarily laws that we should be concerned with but causal relationships and how they can be interpreted (Weber, 1917). Most important though, is how Weber stresses a concrete understanding of the relationship and to avoid an abstract definition. Additionally, he felt that culture, society and reality as we know it cannot be fully explained by laws which is why a full understanding of relationships should be our essential goal (Weber, 1917).

Wherever the causal explanation of a “cultural phenomenon- an “historical individual” is under consideration, the knowledge of causal laws is not the end of the investigation but only a means.
It facilitates and renders possible the causal imputation to their concrete causes of those components of a phenomenon the individuality of which is culturally significant (Weber, 1917: 79).

Weber discusses how we conceive culture and their events and place value on them. Culture is a value-concept. It is defined as “a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance” (Weber, 1917: 81). Cultural reality changes from person to person and from culture to culture. It’s all about the point of view. Significance is placed on certain items or phenomena in one culture and not others. However, certain phenomena end up as reality on a global scale; for example, money and the idea of exchange has deep roots all around the globe (Weber, 1917).

Weber was part of the “historical school” in Heidelberg. This is evident in his methodology; Weber often refers to historical-comparative methods. One of the topics during his discussion on the meaning of culture and its significance was that when defining significance in one’s own culture one must juxtapose one’s own culture with another. In other words, you don’t know exactly what you have until you compare it with something else.

Weber goes deeper into his historical-comparative methods as he discusses the notion of ideal-types. The ideal-type “offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses” (Weber, 1917: 90). This means, a researcher would construct, mentally, based on different points of view, a perfect/utopian example of what he is researching. The researcher would then create his hypothesis based on the juxtaposition of his topic and this ideal-type. Weber warns that this method is only effective if the construct of the ideal-type is plausible; in other words, realistic (Weber, 1917). Weber proves its relevancy by applying the notion of ideal-types to a capitalist economy, Christianity, and even a brothel.

In the closing of his essay on “objectivity,” Weber makes remarks that seem to convey a sense of futility. He stresses, once again, the importance of examining relationships but he notes that researchers during an “age of specialization... will consider the analysis of the data as an end
to itself” (Weber, 1917: 112). Although, he goes on to say that ultimately, it seems, that science will chase whatever will give significance and meaning to its efforts (Weber, 1917).

**The Protestant Ethic**

Of his academic contributions, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* remains his most popular work. In it, he describes the effects of the work ethic of protestant religious groups on the development of capitalism. Weber analyzes Catholics as well; early in the first section titled “The Problem,” he uses the old saying, “either eat well or sleep soundly” in his juxtaposition of the two religious groups; he notes that this saying is fairly accurate in the sense that it proves to be the motivation behind work ethic. He says that based on current data, Catholics want to sleep soundly, where Protestants want to eat well (Weber, 2002 [1905]). You see, the current data I spoke of, and that Weber was using, noted that in Germany, there was a much lower proportion of Catholic business owners. This would indicate that the Catholics of that epoch would enjoy a more secure and scrupulous life as opposed to a life where they might enjoy a higher quality of life. Throughout *The Protestant Ethic* Weber examines religions throughout the world and relates their views and perspectives to their current economy.

In an attempt to make this segment brief, I will refer to Calvinism; mainly because Weber's close ties to the religion. The idea behind the calvinist work ethic was simple. Work hard and you will be rewarded in the afterlife. The only goal that the calvinist had in mind was reaching the “Grace of God.” For calvinists, as Weber put it, “God was not there for the sake of men, but men were there for the sake of God” (Weber, 2002 [1905]:72). In other words, they were there only to please God. And to make things more difficult for them, they believed there was a limit for those that could reach salvation. This led to a constant competition between the men of the Calvinist faith as well as perpetual self-evaluation.

As I said before, it is no surprise that Weber has a particular focus on the economics of a society. One of his most comprehensive works on the subject but still only scratches the surface
of his evaluation of the subject is *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Weber has such an overwhelming amount of material, that it was difficult to extract and focus on his “best” concepts. In the end, the concepts that I chose to discuss were the stepping stones to his overall methodology and academic contributions.

**Relevancy**

Many people will say that a theory is not proven; that's why its a theory. However, Weber's “theory” on rationalization is about as close as you can get to a proofed theory. Although much of his work on the matter could be considered an historical comparison, he effectively made the conclusion that society was going to get progressively 'rationalized.' He had stated that society is an 'iron cage.' This could not be more accurate today. Everywhere you go society has become 'rationalized.' From the coffee shop to the farm, people attempt to make their businesses and lives as efficient as possible. Why? Because efficient businesses are profitable businesses, efficient homes give people more time for leisure activities. And this is true albeit it eliminates your necessity to think half the time. One may argue: “What are you talking about? With all these advances in technologies you have to be able to think. How else will you be able to use a computer or car or phone?” This is a good argument; however, once you are able to operate these technologies, they become second nature and you no longer have to think. This is just the individual's side of the problem. For every other situation people have become policy numbers, prescriber numbers, social security numbers, etc. Most of the time people aren't even looked at as people; they're simply numbers. This makes it even easier for those people in the upper positions to 'rationalize' their decisions. Oh yes, Weber's ideas on rationalization and the 'iron cage' are certainly relevant today.

George Ritzer a great contemporary sociological theorist was influenced heavily by Weber's ideas of 'rationalization.' He was influenced so much that he wrote a book on 'McDonaldization' which is a more modernized form of 'rationalization.' Ritzer (2006) says,
basically, that there are three types of people. There are people that see themselves in a 'velvet cage' and enjoy all of the specialization, efficiency, and convenience; people who see themselves in a 'rubber cage' and are under the illusion that they can escape the grip of 'McDonalization; and finally, those that see themselves in the 'iron cage' and know that there is no escape.

I think when it comes to relationships, Weber's ideas of *verstehen* are relevant in today's society. People are getting away from the attitudes of a few decades ago. As I was growing up, there was not much focus on understanding each other's needs and communicating. More and more people are going to counselors to talk about their marital problems; kids talk to counselors about their parents. I, for one, make an attempt to figure out what my children and wife are thinking and why they are doing what they are doing. In a relationship, a lot can go unnoticed, if you stop and try to understand what someone is doing and why they are acting a certain way, it may unveil facts that you might not have noticed just by looking at the surface of an action.

The *Verstehen* paradigm is used in police forces, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other law enforcement agencies. They would call it *profiling*. This simply means that they consider certain actions, social traits or social situations to help identify the type of person that might perpetrate a crime. They might look at someone that acts a certain way and attribute that to the type of person that would deal drugs. They are using their understanding of the way that someone acts, as well as their past actions and matching that behavior to other individuals that historically commit crimes.

Marketing, sales, and advertising is essential to a capitalist economy. They most certainly use elements of *verstehen*. It is their main goal in life to understand what will entice people. They also have to look at society and figure out what people are doing, why they are doing it and what products are people looking for next. What do they need? What do they want? Individuals in the advertising and marketing business can read people and figure out the best way to sell them a product. A good salesman will know what to say, and when to say it based on the
way people talk and the actions that they take throughout the selling process. For example, a car salesman trying to sell a car to a married couple might say certain things to the husband to keep him interested and then focus on other areas of the deal to keep the wife interested. A good salesman will know and understand what the two different people want to hear and see after the first meeting with the potential clients.

Closing

The most famous biography on Max Weber was written by his wife, Marianne. According to Bendix (1960) “... his wife tells it in her biography, he showed throughout his life an extraordinary appreciation for the problems other people faced and for the shades of mood and meaning that characterized their outlook on life” (p. 32). As I had pointed out earlier in this paper, much of Weber's more remarkable work was accomplished after he began his struggle with a psychosomatic disorder. Much of his work was left incomplete and even more is yet to be translated. Weber's work gave us a new way of looking at the social sciences. He influenced many people to follow in his footsteps which eventually led to the formation and development of a new perspective: symbolic-interactionism. Most important though, he still remains as one of the most influential figures in the history of sociological thought. As I said in my introduction, you have to start somewhere. Max Weber is an icon. He is someone that I will permit to influence me as I study sociology, someone that I can start with and emulate, someone that I can look up to as a mentor.
References


