Notes on Weber
(from Ritzer, 2003)

Max Weber on the Rationalization of Society
Max Weber’s grand theory begins with his formulation of four types of rationality: practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal. It is often argued that Weber’s focus was on formal rationality and the ways in which it contributed to a historical process — rationalization — that transformed the Western world. Weber’s intellectual interest in rationalization led him to study the historical forces that both enabled rationalization in the West and constrained it elsewhere. Foremost among these forces was religion. Weber argued that the Protestant ethic contributed profoundly to the rationalization of the Western world — to such an extent, in fact, that it spurred the development of modern capitalism. Weber also studied other religions — such as Confucianism and Hinduism — and concluded that the ethics of these religions constrained rationalization and the development of capitalism. Weber was also interested in different types of authority, or forms of legitimate domination. He developed a typology of authority structures, which consisted of traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal types of authority. These types of authority are ideal types, or models that scholars can use to compare various specific examples of a phenomenon either across cases or over time. Weber was most interested in the rational-legal type of authority and how empirical approximations to it contributed to rationalization.

Max Weber’s Methodology
Max Weber (1864-1920) argued against abstract theory, and he favored an approach to sociological inquiry that generated its theory from rich, systematic, empirical, historical research. This approach required, first of all, an examination of the relationships between, and the respective roles of, history and sociology in inquiry. Weber argued that sociology was to develop concepts for the analysis of concrete phenomena, which would allow sociologists to then make generalizations about historical phenomena. History, on the other hand, would use a lexicon of sociological concepts in order to perform causal analysis of particular historical events, structures, and processes. In scholarly practice, according to Weber, sociology and history are interdependent.

Weber contended that understanding, or verstehen, was the proper way of studying social phenomena. Derived from the interpretive practice known as hermeneutics, the method of verstehen strives to understand the meanings that human beings attribute to their experiences, interactions, and actions. Weber construed verstehen as a methodical, systematic, and rigorous form of inquiry that could be employed in both macro- and micro-sociological analysis.

Weber's formulation of causality stresses the great variety of factors that may precipitate the emergence of complex phenomena such as modern capitalism. Moreover, Weber argued that social scientists, unlike natural scientists, must take into account the meanings that actors attribute to their interactions when considering causality. Weber, furthermore, sought a middle ground between nomothetic (general laws) and idiographic (idiosyncratic actions and events) views in his notion of a probabilistic adequate causality.

Weber’s greatest contribution to the conceptual arsenal of sociology is known as the ideal type. The ideal type is basically a theoretical model constructed by means of a detailed empirical study of a phenomenon. An ideal type is an intellectual construct that a sociologist may use to study historical realities by means of their similarities to, and divergences from, the model. Note that ideal types are not utopias or images of what the world ought to look like.

Weber urged sociologists to reflect on the role of values in both research and the classroom. When teaching, he argued, sociologists ought to teach students the facts, rather than indoctrinating them to a particular political or personal point of view. Weber did argue, however, that the values of one’s society often help to decide what a scholar will study. He contended that, while values play this very important role in the research process, they must be kept out of the collection and interpretation of data.
Max Weber’s Substantive Sociology
Max Weber’s sociology is fundamentally a science that employs both interpretive understanding and causal explanations of social action and interaction. His typology of the four types of social action is central to comprehending his sociology. According to Weber, social action may be classified as means–ends rational action, value–rational action, affectual action, or traditional action. Any student of Weber must keep in mind that these are ideal types.

Weber developed a multidimensional theory of stratification that incorporated class, status, and party. Class is determined by one’s economic or market situation (i.e., life chances), and it is not a community but rather a possible basis for communal action. Status is a matter of honor, prestige, and one’s style of life. Parties, according to Weber, are organized structures that exist for the purposes of gaining domination in some sphere of social life. Class, status, and party may be related in many ways in a given empirical case, which provides the sociologist with a very sophisticated set of conceptual tools for the analysis of stratification and power.

Weber also made a profound contribution to the study of obedience with his ideal types of legitimate domination or authority. Rational–legal authority rests on rules and law. Traditional authority rests on belief in established practices and traditions — i.e., authority is legitimate because it is exercised the way it has always been exercised. Charismatic authority rests on belief in the extraordinary powers or qualities of a leader. All of these forms of authority must take into account the point of view of those obeying commands. Moreover, each form of authority is associated with a variety of structural forms of organization and administration. Legal authority, for example, is often associated with bureaucracy, while traditional authority is associated with gerontocracy, patriarchalism, patrimonialism, and feudalisim. Charismatic authority may be associated with a charismatic form of organization. The dilemma of charismatic authority, however, consists of the difficulty of maintaining charisma when the charismatic leader dies. In other words, charismatic organizations tend to routinize charisma, which invariably gives rise to either traditional or rational–legal authority.

Weber also argued that rationalization is a long-term historical process that has transformed the modern world. His typology of forms of rationality is central to this argument. He argued that there are four types of rationality: practical, theoretical, formal, and substantive. He was most concerned with processes of formal and substantive rationalization, especially as propelled by capitalism and bureaucracy. Weber argued that rationalization has occurred in many spheres, including the economy, law, religion, politics, the city, and art.

Weber’s arguments regarding rationalization are exemplified in his studies of religion and capitalism. These sophisticated and voluminous studies inquire into the ways in which religious ideas, the spirit of capitalism, and capitalism as an economic system, are interrelated. In short, according to Weber, Calvinism as a rational, methodical system of religious beliefs and practices was an important factor in the emergence of modern capitalism in the Western world. The economic ethics of other religions, such as Hinduism and Confucianism, inhibited the emergence of modern capitalism in India and China. Once modern capitalism emerged in the Western world, however, it spread the effects of rationalization worldwide.

While Weber’s work has had a profound impact on sociology — as well as other disciplines — it is not without its critics. Some critics question the consistency and applicability of Weber’s method of verstehen. Others are puzzled by Weber’s methodological individualism as it is applied to macro-sociology. Some critics have rebuked Weber for failing to offer any alternatives to rationalization, capitalism, and bureaucracy. Finally, many critics decry Weber’s unflagging pessimism about the future of rationalization and bureaucracy.

Verstehen: Max Weber’s Home Page: “A Site for Undergraduates”
http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome.htm#Social
A comprehensive website designed by Frank Elwell at the Rochester State University. This site provides a description of all of Weber’s key concepts, as well as real-life examples and pictures illustrating each. This includes a discussion of the concept of social action.
Weber: Bureaucracy
-Rationalization
-The Iron Cage of Rationality
-Class, status, party
-Protestant Ethis & the Spirit of Capitalism

Weber: (1881-1961)
-Germany (discontent but no revolution, strong central government)

Rationalization
-thought that modern life was characterized by increasing rationalization & disenchantment

-Actions based on calculation and the conscious intellectual weighing of means and ends in making decisions (formal rationality) rather than actions based on basic values and emotions (substantive rationality)

-This leads to the “iron cage of rationality”

-We live in a society dominated by the rational and hierarchical authority of large bureaucracies and large states, industrial technology, profit-oriented capitalism and money exchange, and alienating class structure

-4 characteristics of formal rationality
  - calculability
  - efficiency
  - predictability
  - control over uncertainties

-the process of rationalization often has irrational consequences for the individuals involved, for the systems themselves and for society as a whole.

-Weber thought this process was the inevitable end of modernization.

Bureaucracy
-a modern organizational form with machinelike efficiency

-consists of:
  - written rules and procedures (and following these rules even when they cease to make sense)
  - clear and detailed division of labor
  - hierarchy of area specific authority
    - to constitute a social structure aimed at reaching an organization’s defined goals

-authority is based on a formal or legal-rational position rather than a traditional or charismatic one

-capitalism and bureaucracy are mutually supportive because both demand an overriding spirit of efficiency and rationality to be productive.

Stratification: Economic Class, Social Status, Political Status
-economic class: prestige or social honor as attributed by a community; it is personal
-social status: groups normally compose communities with specific lifestyles
-political parties: groups that represent one’s political interests
The Spirit of Capitalism & The Protestant Ethic
-what is the relationship between the two?

-Protestant ethic attitude discouraged members from wasting their time in fun or rest. Hard work and worldly success served as potential signs that God smiled with favor on the person, and thereby lessened the anxiety of not knowing if one was saved or damned.

-religion underlied the formation of capitalism

Good Question:
-efficiency in exchange for authenticity?

Key Points:
-According to Weber’s verstehen approach, the goal of sociology should be to understand people, because human beings are not inanimate objects.

-Social scientists have a responsibility to minimize the extent to which they rely on their own values in research (not 100% objectivist, doesnt deny the interpretive nature of research).

-Weber saw that in modern civilization there has been a progressive process of rationalization, whereby the use of means-ends calculations is increasing over time.

-Weber argued that the Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism were closely linked to one another and strengthened each other.