

Webers verstehende sociological method

Government, Capitalism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

1. Explain Weber's verstehende sociological method and its relationship to methodological individualism. " Probably the most famous aspect of Weber's thought that reflects the idealist tradition is his emphasis on *verstehen* (subjective understanding) as a method of gaining valid insight into the subjective meanings of social action" (Johnson, 1971: 210). From this we gather that *verstehen* was Weber's way of understanding social action. For Weber social action was an action which an individual undertakes and carries out to which a person attached a meaning (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 953). Weber identifies two types of understanding, *aktuelles verstehen* and *erklarendes verstehen* (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 953). According to Weber, *verstehen* is an empirical sociology of the understanding of meaning (Kaiser 1979: 176). *Aktuelles verstehen* refers to the direct observational understanding (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 953). Direct observational understanding with its regards to that of ideas, of actions and of irrational emotional reaction (Kaiser, 1979: 176). For example by looking at someone's facial expression to you can tell the type of mood that they in, like being happy. This is however not a sufficient level of understanding for Weber to explain social action which is why there is the second type of understanding *erklarendes verstehen* (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 953). It is also known as the explanatory understanding, it questions the symbolic quality of the action being observed to try and understanding the meaning and motives of the act (Kaiser, 1979: 176). With explanatory understanding it is necessary for the theorist to put themselves in the shoes of the persons whose behaviour is being explained, in order to try understanding the motives behind the actions (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 953). Basically *verstehen*

is about trying to set out scientific method, therefore it common sense verses scientific methods. Verstehen is a way of trying to incapacitate methodological (how structures determine our behaviour) individualism (Johnson, 1971: 211). Methodological individualism is a principle that states, " All social phenomena- including social structure and social change- can in principle be accounted for by explanations that refer only to individuals and their behaviour" (Elster, 2000: 24). Therefore it is the principle that is a restriction to explain the intricate social phenomena by looking at its components individually and not as a whole (Elster, 2000: 24). In order to make sense of people's actions and their reasons for those actions we need to be methodological about it, meaning that we have to assume that they are by large rational (Elster, 2000: 25). This is what connects methodological individualism to the notion of verstehen. It is evident from the above that as a way of gaining rational insight into the subjective meaning of social action verstehen was appropriate approach. As putting oneself in the mind frame of the subject and seeing things from their perspective is much better than using scientific knowledge because making value judgements can never come from scientific knowledge (Johnson, 1971: 211). Weber believed that sociology should be an empirical science where the individual is analysed and explained according to their own subjective situations (Johnson, 1971: 211).

2. Explain Weber's concept of rationality and its relationship to bureaucratic forms of organisations. The main idea the notion of rationality is that individuals chosen action is that which best realizes their desires, taken into consideration their beliefs at the time (Elster, 2000: 24). There are different aspects to rationality, but when dealing to that related to

bureaucracy we refer to formal rationality (Elster, 2000: 22). Formal rationality is the procedural concept which allows for the “ calculability and predictability”, defined by Weber as an “ action that is generated by adequate mental processes, he identifies it as action in conformity with what would generated by adequate mental processes” (Elster, 2000: 27).

Bureaucracy is Weber’s best examples of his work on the ideal type (Johnson, 1971: 212). The ideal type is the use of abstract concept; it is to help us understand some things in life. It allows theorist to focus on typical characteristics than focusing on the unique characteristics of social phenomenon (Johnson, 1971: 213). Rationality is embodied in bureaucratic organisations (Johnson, 1971: 225). “ formal rationality requires general rules, hierarchy, full time officials, specialized training and so on” (Elster, 2000: 22). Weber considered modern bureaucracy as the most efficient form of social organisation along with being systematic and predictable. The ideal type characteristics of bureaucracy is that’s its hierarchical organisation being that a higher office controls and supervises a lower one, to achieve the specific goals of the organisation is by having a systematic coordination of individuals, everything needs to be recorded in writing, the members of the administrative staff need to be excluded from the ownership of the means of production, there needs to be rules and regulations which specify the different functions in the office (Whimster, 2004: 246). The bureaucratic form of organisation was efficient for two reasons, one that it links the interests of the individual and the motivational energy with the performance of organisational functions in a systematic manner (Johnson, 1971: 226). Secondly, it systematically excluded all personal elements, which meant, “

individuals can establish relations as occupants of organizational positions even though they may be strangers on a personal level" (Johnson, 1971: 227). This is the reason that made Weber concerned about the dehumanizing effect of the bureaucratic system (Whimster, 2004: 247). 3. In reacting against Marx's perceived economic determinism, Weber highlighted the role of ideas (idealism) in social change. Critically analyse his exposition of the protestant ethic in the rise of capitalism. Weber's work on The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism was his effort to demonstrate how historical change is influenced by role of ideas ((Johnson, 1971: 230). The main purpose was to show how powerful the Protestant ethic was in promoting the growth of the economic system at the time (Johnson, 1971: 230). One can say that it was the battle between the Catholics and the Protestants. The Catholics who the ruling religion and were considered to be "backward" and had no ambition, had no interest for economic advancement, who hardly ever gained advancement from their current position (Hamilton, 2000: 152). The Protestant however were the opposite, they had ambition, professionally trained, had high managerial positions and were business orientated as compared to the Catholics (Hamilton, 2000: 152). The Protestant ethic showed a more inner worldly asceticism which is the commitment by oneself to deny any opportunity for indulgent in order to pursue a higher order (Johnson, 1971: 232). This resulted from a genuine religious background, in the belief of the predestination (Johnson, 1971: 232). Once capitalism was established according to Weber religious support had died out in Franklins time, which is the reason why it can be said that the spirit of capitalism undermined any religious ethic that helped support its

establishment. Weber's critique Rachfahl claims that Weber had not provided enough evidence to support his thesis and because of this had failed to correctly identify a relationship between Protestantism and capitalism (Hamilton, 2000: 164). The reason for this belief according to Rachfahl is that the spirit of capitalism was an instinct acquisition which had gone beyond the immediate gratification of needs, because of this it had resulted in the accumulation of capital (Hamilton, 2000: 165). Basically " it was attended by speculation and exploitation of the economic situation of the moment and the mathematical calculations of the relationship between the available means and the likely result" (Hamilton, 2000: 165).

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