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WALLERSTEIN, IMMANUEL (1930–) See world-systems theory.

WEBER, MAX (1864–1920) With Emile Durkheim, Max Weber is rightly regarded as the founder of modern sociology. In our opinion he was the superior sociologist: he developed a philosophical basis for the social sciences, a conceptual basis for sociology, and a range of scholarly studies that covered economic history, the sociology of law, a comparative sociology of religion, and a sociology of music.

Durkheim tried to model sociology on the natural sciences. Weber started from a conviction that sociology was concerned with the explanation of human action in its historical context and especially in the light of actors' understandings of their situation. Weber's distinctive approach can be illustrated though his best known work, which deals with the origins of capitalism and the social consequences of religious belief systems. 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' was first published as an essay in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in 1905. For Weber what needs to be explained is the transcending of **economic traditionalism**. Most pre-modern people had relatively fixed notions of their expected standard of living and, given the choice, preferred less work to more money. The customary rate of return was accompanied by customary ways of working. Those who did

exhibit the desire for great wealth tried to find it in extravagant ways: merchants staked their fortunes on single ships and lords invested in foreign wars. What was missing were precisely those features which Weber thought distinguished modern capitalism: the desire for the calculable and steady rate of return on investment; a rational experimental attitude to improving work methods; a willingness to work hard.

The distribution of early capitalism – Britain, Holland, the USA and the Protestant parts of Germany rather than France, Portugal, Spain or Italy – suggested a connection with religion. Weber argued that key ideas of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century had the **unintended consequence** of encouraging new attitudes to work and wealth. Martin Luther rejected the idea of a religious division of labour that allowed religious officials to placate God on behalf of others. All people had to be responsible for their own salvation: 'every man his own monk'. This call for universal piety was made compatible with the continuation of normal life by Luther's new concept of the vocation. He taught that any legitimate occupation, performed in the right spirit, was pleasing to God. The Reformers removed the clergy's power to cleanse sin through confession and penance. Without the ability to wipe the slate clean, people had to be constantly attentive to their spiritual state. John Calvin's distinctive contribution was to the doctrine of pre-destination. If God was

all-knowing and all-powerful then he must know which of us was destined for heaven and which for hell, even before we were born. The Puritans believed that nothing would change God's mind but they did want to know. They worked hard to the glory of God and avoided temptation. If they prospered they took this as a sign of divine blessing. This and other ideological innovations created a new ethos which Weber summarised as *this-worldly* asceticism. The Protestant ethic alone could not create capitalism (appropriate material conditions were required) but it did create a personality and a series of attitudes towards work and expenditure – the 'spirit' of capitalism – that were unusually well-suited to rational capitalism.

This study encapsulates the distinctive features of Weber's work. First, it grants methodological primacy to **Verstehen**, the explanatory understanding of people's reasons for acting in their historical context. Second, this study exemplifies Weber's belief that there was no logic to history, at least in the way that Karl **Marx** or Georg **Hegel** supposed. Modern capitalism comes about for rather accidental reasons, as the thoroughly unintended consequence of religious reform. However Weber did believe there was a kind of directionality to history. By and large, rationalisation tended to increase. Once modern capitalism was underway, factory owners and managers were driven to run their plants in ever more rational ways. But other aspects of society and culture are subject to the discipline of rationalisation as well – this is indicated in his famous division of types of authority into the traditional, charismatic and legal-rational. Religious beliefs become codified and subject to rational streamlining. Equally, the work of the state becomes bureaucratised. In his analyses of bureaucracy, Weber demonstrated how to use the **ideal-type** in sociological research. From studies of actual bureaucratic organisations he extracted the ideal-typical features of bureaucracy. He was trying to sum up the

quintessence of bureaucratic organisation without implying any moral judgements or claiming that any actual bureaucracy would display all those features in just those idealised forms.

Weber pointed out that all these developments might not be rational in the sense that they were good for promoting overall human well-being; they were intended to be procedurally efficient ways of achieving set goals (termed *zweckrational* or instrumentally rational). Weber was pessimistic about this tendency fearing that the world would become progressively disenchanted with more and more attention paid to achieving goals and less heed paid to the worth of the goals themselves.

This last point highlights another decisive feature of his approach to sociology, spelled out in the posthumously published *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1949). Weber argued in favour of value freedom in the social sciences, meaning that though the sociologist had professional values as an academic and was drawn to certain topics because of their importance to his or her values, the analysis had to stand independently of those values. Weber was very concerned about these issues, seeing value freedom as central to the independence required by academic scholars; for him this was integral to the freedom that academia should enjoy from the state. In terms of the politics of his day, Weber was a liberal. He was sceptical about the prospects of socialism not least because he suspected that the centralisation of power and control would lead not to universal freedom but to universal bureaucracy.

In his many other works Weber was chiefly concerned with religion and social change in non-European cultures though he wrote essays on many aspects of economic history and on the development of legal systems as well. His work abounds with historical understanding and with compelling theoretical insights, for example, in the classification of the types of authority outlined above.