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historical phenomenon, the emergence and growth of modern capitalism. So the Marxian theory concentrates on the changes involved in the replacement of feudalism by industrial capitalism in European history. The feudal economic system was based on a small-scale agricultural production; the two principal classes being aristocrats and serfs. So to Marx, as trade and technology (forces of production) developed, major changes began to occur in the social fabric. This led to a new set of economic relations, centred on capitalist manufacture and industry in towns and cities. Conflicts between aristocrats and the newly developing capitalist class ultimately led to the process of revolution, signaling the consolidation of a new type of society. In other words, industrial capitalism replaced feudalism.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Where and when was Karl Marx born?
2. Name the newspaper of which Marx became editor.
3. What do you understand by 'pauperization'?
4. Which were the three major elements that influenced Marx's doctrines?
5. List any two ideas of material interpretation of history as propounded by Marx.

3.9 MAX WEBER

Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Thuringia, on 21 April 1864. His father, Max Weber, Sr., a trained jurist and municipal counselor, came from a family of linen merchants and textile manufacturers of western Germany. Max Weber's mother, Helene Fallenstein Weber, was a cultured and liberal Protestant². Max Weber joined the University of Heidelberg at the age of eighteen where he studied law and passed the bar in 1886. In 1889 he received his doctoral degree in medieval commercial law with specialization in legal history and Roman agrarian law. He became a barrister in the Berlin court and simultaneously taught law at the University of Berlin. He was the founder of German Sociological Society in 1910 along with Ferdinand Tonnies and Georg Simmel.

Max Weber, a great German sociologist had left a deep imprint upon sociology, mainly because he developed a coherent philosophy of social sciences. Weber's contributions to sociology cannot be understood without reference to the intellectual, especially the philosophical and scientific climate of Germany at the beginning of 20th century. His intellectual and emotional struggles never seem to have been resolved, for he attempted to combine political realism with a genuine nationalism often in the guise of a critique of the German government. While deeply committed to ethical problems and the cultural significance of the ongoing power

² Gerth, H.H. and C. Wright Mills (eds and translators). 1946. *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: OUP.

struggle in Germany, he never ceased being a scientifically motivated analyst of power politics. The struggle centred around his desire to develop a conceptual method of historical knowledge able to bridge historical description and sociological theory. Weber worked tenaciously for the development of a scientific method for the study of human society. Weber believed that sociology could maintain a scientific posture in the pursuit of all human action without bias. To that commitment of a humane, refined, science of human behaviour, Weber gave his life, producing works of genius yet unsurpassed in their excellence and boldness of analysis and style. His major works include *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *Systems of Authority*, *Economy and Society*, etc.

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3.10 SOCIAL ACTION

Sociology, according to Weber, was an exhaustive science of social action. He differed from his predecessors who conceived sociology as dealing with social structures. Weber wanted to focus on the biased views that the human actors attached to their actions in certain socio-historical framework. Weber defined sociology 'as a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects'. The technical category of 'action' described in Weber's work is all human behaviour to which an actor attaches subjective meaning. An action is social insofar as by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual; it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. Emphasis on subject understanding led Weber to a scientific decision of highest importance. To him, behaviour devoid of subjective meaning belongs to the periphery of sociological study. The subjective meaning that is ascribed to an action is termed as *verstehen* (understanding) by Weber. According to Weber, the *verstehen* approach is the chief methodology by which the social actions that are undergoing in the society can be understood.

Weber was intrigued by the assigned reasons for identifiable behaviour given by actors themselves. These behaviour complexes, oriented by individuals within specifiable socio-historical settings, were the subject of sociological analysis. Weber, however, considers social action as an action conditioned by past, present or future. To him, social action is found within the matrix of social relationship between two actors. And causes of social actions lay in the realm of meaningful experience of actors.

Four major types of social actions are distinguished in Weber's sociology. These are:

- (1) *Zweckrational* action is rational action in relation to a *goal*. The actor determines the goal and chooses his means purely in terms of their efficiency to attain the goal.
- (2) *Wertrational* action is rational action in relation to a *value*. Here means are chosen for their efficiency but the ends are determined by

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value. The action of a captain who goes down with the sinking ship or that of a gentleman who allows himself to be killed rather than yield in a duel are examples.

- (3) *Affective* or *emotional* actions are emotions or impulses that determine the ends and means; for example, a player who punches his partner in a game.
- (4) *Raditional* actions are those where both ends and means are determined by custom. Rituals, ceremonies and practices of tradition fall in this category.

Through this classification, Weber made logical distinctions between various types of actions and also used it to analyse the Western historical development. Weber worked mostly on modern western society, where people's behaviour was ruled by goal-oriented rationality. Prior to this, behaviours were determined by value-oriented rationality. His approach to sociology is thus quite distinct from his predecessors as he focused primarily on the causes and determinants of behaviour in the historical development of the western society. However, Weber did not claim that this was an exhaustive classification of the way in which social action could be oriented, nor did he claim that any particular sequence of social action would be of entirely *one type* and could be understood in terms of it. They were *limiting types* but particular types for the understanding of particular social situations which might require the combining of several of them.

3.11 AUTHORITY

Power has been viewed by Weber as an instrument in influencing social relationships. A powerful person, most often than not, imposes this power on the other individual (who has less power than him) in his interactions. Thus, power in a sociological aspect, creates an inequality. Max Weber has defined power as 'the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action'. In Weberian terminology, power is simply the degree to which an individual or group can get its own way in a social relationship. The impact of power varies from situation to situation. On the one hand, it depends on the capacity of the powerful individual to exercise power. On the other hand, it depends upon the extent to which it is opposed or resisted by the others. While analysing the sources of power, Weber discusses two contrasting sources. These are:

- (i) Power which is derived from a constellation of interests that develop in a formally free market.
- (ii) An established system of authority that allocates the right to command and the duty to obey.

3.11.1 Weber's Discussion of Authority Relations

Karl Marx and Max Weber

While classifying the types of social action, Weber maintained that men often claimed authority and expected people to follow his orders willingly. Authority, according to him, may be exuded on rational, legal or contractual basis. Authority is that form of power which is accepted as legitimate, that is as right and just, and therefore, should be obeyed. Weber has enumerated three types of authority.

- (i) Rational or legal authority that has increasingly come to characterize hierarchical relations in modern society.
- (ii) Traditional authority: This type of authority has no legal sanction to it. Rather, it is bestowed on an individual because tradition maintained it, or due to the rules of inheritance or social norms. Traditional authority was present in pre-modern society.
- (iii) Charismatic authority: Charisma is that quality in an individual that sets him apart from his fellowmen. This charismatic individual is treated differently (mostly as a leader) as he is believed to be endowed with supernatural or exceptional powers. So, these leaders, either through their extraordinary religious, heroic or ethical appeal, exude authority. Thus, though Hitler's meteoric rise can be accorded to his charismatic personality, Weber is of the opinion that there were aspects of rational legal authority in German law as well that propelled him to the hall of fame. Weber considered authority as being the instance of relations between the leader and the follower and not as a virtue of the leader alone.

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3.12 BUREAUCRACY

Weber's analysis of authority and rationalization of power led him to discuss large-scale operations in economic, administrative and political arenas of social life. Weber was the first to give an elaborate account of the development of bureaucracy as well as its causes and consequences. To him, bureaucratic coordination of activities is the distinctive mark of the modern era. Bureaucracies are organized on rational principles. Bureaucracy is a hierarchical order in which superiors and inferiors are arranged vertically. Bureaucratic administration is always from a formal or technical point of view to a rational type of administration.

Max Weber attributed the following characteristics to bureaucracy:

- The convention of administrative areas are generally ordered by rules.
- The principle of graded authority in office hierarchy is based on supervision of the lower levels of employees by their seniors.
- A division of labour based on specialized functions and responsibilities.
- A system of written documents defining the procedure as well as the rights and duties of people in all positions.

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- Office management based on thorough and expert training.
- Selection for employment and promotion based on technical competence, specialized knowledge or skill.
- Office holding as a 'vocation', official work is no longer a secondary activity but something that demands the full working capacity of the official.
- Provision for pecuniary compensations as a fixed salary.
- Appointment of employees by higher officials.
- The system of tenure for life.

Weber attributed the following factors which contribute to the development of modern bureaucracy:

- (i) The development of money economy which guaranteed a constant income for maintaining bureaucracy through a stable system of taxation.
- (ii) The quantitative development of administrative tasks, especially in the field of politics, where 'the great state' and mass party are the classic soil for bureaucratization.
- (iii) Qualitative changes of administrative tasks.
- (iv) Bureaucracy is accepted as the most superior of all organizations.

Weber considered bureaucracy as the prestigious influence that has shaped the political, economic and technological aspects of modern society. However, he also analysed the disadvantages of a bureaucratic setup. The modern bureaucratic, rationalized systems are not capable in dealing with individual problems as the previous systems were. Weber maintained that rationalization and bureaucracy are the inevitable results of the modern world. Bureaucrats fail to tolerate at a human level and mostly deal with problems and people in a detached manner. After analysing the dysfunctions of bureaucracy, Weber considers a possible alternative was the *emergence of a charismatic leader* to control this process. Moreover, he also admits that the dangers could be avoided by strong parliamentary institutions and regular elections.

3.13 RELIGION AND ECONOMY

Weber considered religious beliefs to be a major influence on economic behaviour. In this light, Weber started exploring the fundamental relationship between religion and modern capitalism. Sociology still looks to his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a classical study in the field. In this work, Weber examines the relationship between the rise of certain forms of Protestantism and the development of western industrial capitalism.

Weber begins with the rejection of the Marxist view which regarded economic substructure as the cause of all social change. He argued that the essence of capitalism is the 'pursuit of profit and forever renewed profit'. Capitalist enterprises are organized on rational bureaucratic lines. For him, protestant ethic

was a sub-species of social phenomena within the category religious category. Religion, according to Weber, was distinct from magic. However, the investigation of the relationship between religious values and economic interests was triggered by a number of factors.

Firstly, Weber noticed that Protestants, particularly Protestants of certain sects were the chief captains of industry and possessed more wealth and economic means than other religious groups, i.e., Catholics. Thus, studied whether the spirit of Protestantism and capitalism go hand in hand. He also examined the mercantile values of China, India and the Middle East to ascertain if these helped or hindered the growth of capitalism. Weber, while analysing capitalism and Protestant ethic, made use of the concept of *ideal type*. Protestant ethic does not refer to any particular theological doctrine but a set of values and belief systems that make up a religious ideal. Capitalism, in its ideal type, is thought of by Weber to be that complex activity designed specifically to maximize profit through the careful and intentional exercise of rational organization and management of production. But capitalism as an economic enterprise designed to maximize profit existed all over the world. The capitalist way of life had ethics, duties and obligations and was not the means of making money. He was concerned with the study of the extent to which this religious belief has spread their influence in the modern societies. In his essay, Weber sets out to explore the relationship between a particular religious ethic and a certain kind of capitalist spirit. He considered two conditions through which capitalism grows. To Weber these are 'normative order' and 'institutional support'. When these two conditions are present, rational capitalism grows.

According to Weber, like all other religions, Protestantism or more specifically, Calvinism is full with a set of religious ideas. But these ideas are not mystic, not utopian but quite practical in their philosophy. The basic characteristics of Calvinism that were responsible for the growth of rational capitalism are:

1. A shift from ritualistic other-worldly orientation to downright pragmatism. The finite mind of man cannot comprehend the infinite mind of God who created the world for his own glory. Man should understand the natural order without indulging in mysticism. This gives birth to an inquisitive mind culminating in the development of science and rational investigation.
2. Changed attitude towards work: Protestant ethics proclaim work as a virtue as it contributes to the glory of God. So they encouraged gainful enterprises and gave the individuals a new spirit to have a decent standard of living through an enriched work culture.
3. Concept of calling: This idea emerged from the Calvinist doctrine of *predestination*. To Calvinism, calling is a strenuous and exalting enterprise to be pursued with a sense of religious responsibility. It is chosen by people themselves. Labour then is not merely an instrumental mean but a spiritual end.

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4. The new attitude towards the collection of interest on loans: The theological doctrine of Catholicism proscribed the collection of interest on loans.
5. Strictures on alcoholism: Protestant ethics prohibits the consumption of alcoholic beverage which got enormous contribution for the growth of capitalism.
6. Encouragement of literacy and learning: Based on the conviction that every man should read his own bible rather than depend on priestly interpretations, protestant ethic placed great emphasis on literacy and learning which lead to a significant breakthrough in the sphere of education, leading to the development of mass education and of specialized skills.
7. Rejection of holidays: Though Catholicism favours holidays, Protestantism does not favour holidays and believes that work contributes to the glory of God, i.e., work is worship.
8. Protestant asceticism: Protestant ethic also incorporates the notion that earthly things and flesh belong to the order of sin and death and therefore one should abstain from the pleasures of the world. Thus on one hand, Protestant ethic exhorts people to accumulate wealth; on the other hand, it forbids the use of wealth for enjoyment. This means a ceaseless pursuit of profit not for the sake of enjoying the pleasures of life but simply for the satisfaction of producing more and more, undoubtedly a condition par excellence for the development of capitalism. Weber argued that ascetic Protestantism preceded the growth of Western capitalism. He maintained that protestant ethics was an important factor in the development of the spirit of capitalism. In turn, the spirit of capitalism directed the practice of capitalism.

Weber has been criticized for his blind belief in only one religion while he takes a negative stance for other religions. Moreover, his idea that Protestantism gives birth to capitalism is not exactly true in the practical sense of the term because capitalism as an economic system demands some infrastructural backing which is never generated through Protestantism.

3.14 CLASS, STATUS AND POWER

According to Max Weber, class refers to any group of people that is found in the same class situation. Class, in his opinion, is distinguished by the following three characteristics:

1. Individuals share a particular causal facet of life.
2. These facts are represented by economic drive, in the possession of goods and opportunities for accumulation of property.
3. Class situation is essentially market situation.

However, it must be remembered that classes are not communities; these are only the foundations for community actions. What we refer to as 'status groups' are usually communities. Status is the positive or negative social estimation of honour and has no link with the class situation. Therefore, class is a status group. The highest prestige in society does not always belong to the richest class. The status groups are distinguished on the basis of status symbols such as special attire, exclusive clubs and unique lifestyles. Classes are often classified depending on their relation to the means of production and acquisition of goods. Status groups are stratified according to the principle of their consumption of goods as marked by unique lifestyle. While status groups belong to the social order, classes make up the economic framework within a society.

Weber defines class in terms of two variables: *the ownership of property* and *the possession of skills that can be sold*. This provides a simple but widely applicable stratification of societies. Slave-owners, patriarchal owners of landed estates, capitalists who own companies and stocks are positively privileged, in terms of class, by virtue of property. Underneath and economically subordinated are the slaves, the peasants and serfs and the wage-earners. Possession or non-possession of skills provides a more complex picture of stratification, in that skills are often more graduated through a society. In today's societies, the economic division of labour produces a variety of gradations in terms of types of skills in particular areas: semi-skilled, unskilled and professional skills. These gradations are not fixed, but change according to the development and dynamics of the economy, as certain skills are made redundant while new ones appear. In a medieval economy, skill differences were institutionalized through guild regulations as well as by status ascription; if one was born a peasant, one almost always remained a peasant on the lord's estate.

According to Weber, parties exist in a social club as well as state; they seek to influence communal action and acquire power. Weber acknowledged that the dimensions of economic power interact with social power. In European medieval society, status distinctions defined economic opportunities. In today's capitalistic societies, class distinctions are becoming almost completely dominant over status distinctions, and this can be seen in the inability of professional groups to defend their special skills in the face of those who control economic and financial power. This is referred to as the 'marketization' of society. Status distinctions can also be used to buttress economic class position and, conversely, economic power may be consolidated into status distinctions. Weber discusses and illustrates the interactions that occur in different periods of history and in different societies between leadership, economic power (class) and social power (status).

Though Weber never defined society, it is inferred that he considered society to consist of complex of human interrelationships characterized by meaningful behaviours of a plurality of actors. The fundamental element of sociological investigation for Weber is typical social action or even the single individual whom he called the basic unit of society. However, Weber is justifiably considered to

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have been one of the greatest sociologists of the 20th century for valid reasons. First, his work provides magnificent examples of the kind of painstaking study of concrete social situations and process that must form the foundation of any adequate sociological theory. Secondly, as in the case of Durkheim, he helped to make clear the significant role of values in social life, while emphasizing the necessity of keeping social science value free. Thirdly, he demonstrated that much can be achieved by using the ideal type procedure in social science. Finally, he contributed enormously to the understanding of social causation and its inseparability for the problem of meaning in human affairs.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

6. List a few of Weber's major works.
7. How had Weber defined sociology?
8. List two types of social actions proposed by Weber.
9. List the types of authorities that Weber propounded.
10. What was Weber's views on bureaucracy?

3.15 SUMMARY

- Karl Marx was a socialist theoretician and organizer, a major figure in the history of economic and philosophical thought, and a great social prophet. He was born on 5 May 1818 to Keinrich and Henrietta Marx in Germany.
- The sociological importance of Marx lies in the fact that his ideas have contributed to the development of a new approach to the study of social phenomena. Marx's genius lay not so much in his absolute originality but rather in the constellation and configuration of his ideas and insights gained from several influences. Hegel's influence upon him, for instance, is illustrative of Marx's receptivity and ability to modify a fundamental theory.
- It has often been said that Marx fashioned his doctrine out of three major elements: German idealism (especially in its Hegelian version), French socialist tradition and British political economy. Other streams of thought, primarily the German and French Enlightenment, were equally important to him.
- Both Hegel and Comte had propounded that the evolution of ideas and the human spirit helped in the evolution of mankind. However, Marx's thinking was quite different to this. Though Marx was not satisfied by Hegelian idealism, but Hegel's use of dialectical methodology grabbed his attention.
- While explaining the theory of social change, Marx brought out the notion of social class. Marx's class theory rests on the premise that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle'. According to this

view, ever since human society emerged from its primitive and relatively undifferentiated state, it has remained fundamentally divided between classes that clash in the pursuit of class interests.

- According to Marx, the struggles for power that result from class interests are the basic agents of social process. The relationship of men always depends upon their positions vis-à-vis the means of productions and Marx's analysis centres on such differential access to scarce resources and scarce power.
- Marx developed his theory of class conflict in the context of capitalist society. In the capitalistic mode of production the class antagonism acquires most acute dimensions.
- A state of estrangement of a person from his own self as well as others is a psycho-social condition named 'alienation'. Marx borrowed the concept of estrangement from Hegel and Feurbach and gave a sociological angle to it in his book, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* published in 1844. The history of mankind, according to Marx, was a history of control of nature by man and a simultaneous history of continuing alienation of man.
- Karl Marx, from a conflict perspective, provided a dialectical historical approach for the study of social change. Marx's interpretation of social change has something in common with evolutionary theories. Both regard the major patterns of change as being brought about by interaction with the material environment. Marx opined that the economic structure that every society rests on might get modified over a period of time, thereby influencing and affecting changes in the legal, political and cultural institutions.
- Human beings are always bringing in change in their systems of production and controlling the material world, thereby making changes in the social infrastructure. The level of economic progress of a society can be determined by these changes. Marx believed that social change is brought about not by a slow process, but by a revolutionary transformation.
- Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Thuringia, on 21 April 1864. His father, Max Weber, Sr., a trained jurist and municipal counselor, came from a family of linen merchants and textile manufactures from western Germany.
- Weber's contributions to sociology cannot be understood without reference to the intellectual, especially the philosophical and scientific climate of Germany at the beginning of 20th century. His intellectual and emotional struggles never seem to have been resolved, for he attempted to combine political realism with a genuine nationalism often in the guise of a critique of the German government. While deeply committed to ethical problems and the cultural significance of the ongoing power struggle in Germany, he never ceased being a scientifically motivated analyst of power politics.
- Sociology, according to Weber, was an exhaustive science of social action. He differed from his predecessors who conceived sociology as dealing with social structures. Weber wanted to focus on the biased views that the

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human actors attached to their actions in certain socio-historical framework. Weber defined sociology 'as a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects'.

- Weber's analysis of authority and rationalization of power led him to discuss large-scale operations in economic, administrative and political arenas of social life. Weber was the first to give an elaborate account of the development of bureaucracy as well as its causes and consequences. To him, bureaucratic coordination of activities is the distinctive mark of the modern era. Bureaucracies are organized on rational principles. Bureaucracy is a hierarchical order in which superiors and inferiors are arranged vertically. Bureaucratic administration is always from a formal or technical point of view to a rational type of administration.
- Weber considered religious beliefs to be a major influence on economic behaviour. In this light, Weber started exploring the fundamental relationship between religion and modern capitalism. Sociology still looks to his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a classical study in the field. In this work, Weber examines the relationship between the rise of certain forms of Protestantism and the development of Western industrial capitalism.

3.16 KEY TERMS

- **Bourgeois:** The capitalist property-owners.
- **Proletariat:** The working class.
- **Pauperization:** The process of making working class poorer through exploitative means of production.
- **Alienation:** A worker becomes estranged from his own self due to oppressive methods of the capitalists and loses interest in work.
- **Verstehen:** The subjective meaning that is ascribed to an action by Weber.

3.17 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Karl Marx was a socialist theoretician and organizer, a major figure in the history of economic and philosophical thought, and a great social prophet. He was born on 5 May 1818 to Keinrich and Henrietta Marx in Germany.
2. The name of the newspaper was *Rheinische Zeitung*. It was based in Cologne.
3. In a mode of production which invokes exploitation, the majority of people are condemned to toil for barest necessities of life. This is pauperization. So, to Marx, poverty is the result of exploitation and not of scarcity.

4. It has often been said that Marx fashioned his doctrines out of three major elements: German idealism (especially in its Hegelian version), French socialist tradition and British political economy. Other streams of thought, primarily the German and French Enlightenment, were equally important to him.
5. Following are Marx's important ideas of material interpretation of history:
 - Man enters into definite relations by the force of economic circumstances such as the forces and relations of production. Thus, historical processes are determined by economic forces.
 - The infrastructure of a society includes forces and relations of production. On this is based the superstructure of legal and political institutions, as well as ways of thinking.
6. His major works include *The Protestant Ethic and the Sprit of Capitalism*, *Systems of Authority, Economy and Society*.
7. Sociology, according to Weber, was an exhaustive science of social action. He differed from his predecessors who conceived sociology as dealing with social structures.
8. Two types of social actions in Weber's sociology are:
 - Zweckrational action is rational action in relation to a *goal*. The actor determines the goal and chooses his means purely in terms of their efficiency to attain the goal.
 - Traditional actions are those where both ends and means are determined by custom. Rituals, ceremonies and practices of tradition fall in this category.
9. Weber classified authority as rational or legal, traditional and charismatic.
10. Weber was the first to give an elaborate account of the development of bureaucracy as well as its causes and consequences. To him, bureaucratic coordination of activities is the distinctive mark of the modern era.

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3.18 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. How was Marx influenced by Hegel?
2. Which was the most important phase in Marx's life and why?
3. What do you understand by 'primacy of matters'?
4. What according to Marx was 'class'?
5. Write a note on 'class struggle as an instrument of social change'.
6. What was the *verstehen* approach?

Long-Answer Questions

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1. Write a detailed note on Marx's early life.
2. What are the major contradictions in a capitalist society? Explain.
3. Discuss the concept of alienation.
4. Examine the various stages of class struggle.
5. Critically analyse Karl Marx's theory of social change.
6. Analyse the various dimensions of social stratification given by Weber.
7. Discuss the typology of social action by Weber.
8. Explore the Weberian notion of social change with special reference to his analysis of the relationship between economy and religion.
9. Discuss Weber's notion of authority with suitable examples.
10. What is ideal type? Give suitable examples from Weber's perspectives of ideal types.

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UNIT 4 TALCOTT PARSONS AND ROBERT K. MERTON

*Talcott Parsons and Robert
K. Merton*

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Structure

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Unit Objectives
- 4.2 Talcott Parsons
- 4.3 Action Theory
- 4.4 Pattern Variables
- 4.5 Theory of Social Systems
- 4.6 Theory of Social Change
- 4.7 Robert K. Merton
 - 4.7.1 Theory of Social Structure and Paradigm of Functional Analysis
- 4.8 Middle-Range Theory
 - 4.8.1 Manifest and Latent Functions
- 4.9 Theory of Anomie
- 4.10 Reference Group Theory
 - 4.10.1 Determinants of Reference Groups
- 4.11 Sociology of Science
- 4.12 Summary
- 4.13 Key Terms
- 4.14 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 4.15 Questions and Exercises
- 4.16 Further Reading/References

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with the lives and works of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Here we discuss the action theory, theory of pattern variables and the theory of social system as propounded by Talcott and the sociological significance thereof. We also critically analyse the theories of social structure, role-set, reference group, anomie and paradigm of functional analysis as introduced by Merton.

4.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Learn about the lives and works of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton
- Understand the action theory as proposed by Parsons
- Elaborate on the theory of pattern variable
- Know more about the theory of social system
- Analyse the theory of social structure proposed by Merton

- Elaborate on the role-set theory
- Critique the reference group theory
- Examine the theory of anomie
- Learn about the paradigm of functional analysis

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4.2 TALCOTT PARSONS

Talcott Parsons was born in Colorado, USA on 13 December 1902 to Edward Smith and Mary Augusta. Parsons' father was an academician and the vice-president of the Colorado College. Parsons studied biology, philosophy and sociology in Amherst College as an undergraduate and was attracted to medicine as a career option. However, Parsons also found philosophy interesting and went on to complete his Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg in sociology and economics. Talcott Parsons eventually became a leading exponent of functionalism and had a considerable influence upon American sociological tradition of various scholars.

The works of Weber, the economists Durkheim and Pareto, were important in shaping Parson's theoretical views. Parsons took upon himself the responsibility to provide a general theoretical structure for the whole of sociology, which would serve, also, to integrate all the social sciences. Like Durkheim, Parsons began with the question of how social order is possible. He observed that social life is characterized by mutual advantage and peaceful cooperation rather than mutual hostility and destruction. A large part of Parsons' sociology is concerned with explaining how this state of affairs is accomplished. Critically analysing utilitarian economic theory, positivism, idealism, etc., Parsons maintains that a sociological theory should take into account the subjective dimension. Sociological theories should also permit systematic comparison of all societies and the development of general laws about them.

Parsons has emphasized the necessity of developing a systematic, general theory of human behaviour. He views the development of abstract theory as the principal index of maturity of a science. Such theory facilitates description, analysis and empirical research. And such pursuits require a general frame of reference and demand understanding of the structure of the theoretical system. Sociological theory, according to Parsons, is structural-functional. Being influenced by Marshall, Durkheim, Weber and Pareto, he provided a general theoretical scheme in his *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), *Towards a General Theory of Action* (1951) and *The Social System* (1951). Sociological theory, according to him, must be an action theory based on voluntaristic principle which means it should take into account goals, values, normative standards and action choices which actors make on the basis of alternative values and goals. Moreover, sociological theory must take into account the principle of emergence.

4.3 ACTION THEORY

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Parsons' early contributions were based on the conviction that the appropriate subject matter of sociology is social action, a view reflecting the strong influence of Max Weber, and to some extent, Thomas. In *The Structure of Social Action* Parsons presents an extremely complicated theory of social action in which it is held to be *voluntaristic behaviour*. The analysis is largely based on the means-end scheme. Such a complex formulation of theory of social action representing an ambitious but early effort by Parsons is interwoven with a detailed analysis of the theories of Weber, Durkheim, Pareto and Alfred Marshall. Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action emerged from two different traditions—the tradition of *positivistic utilitarianism* on one hand and the tradition of *idealism* on the other.

Action, according to Parsons does not take place in isolation. It involves an actor, a situation and the orientation of the actor to the situation. To him, the concept of action is derived from behaviour of human being as living organism. So, social action is that behaviour by which man reacts to the external forces after understanding and interpreting them. It is motivated and directed by the meanings which the actor discerns in the external world, which he takes into account and to which he responds. So, the essential feature of social action is the actor's sensitivity to the meaning of the people and things around him, his perception of these meanings and his reactions to the meanings. Any behaviour becomes action when:

- (i) It is oriented to attainment of ends or goals
- (ii) It occurs in situations
- (iii) It is regulated by norms and values of society and
- (iv) It involves an investment of energy or motivation or effort

So, Parsons, while focusing on actors' orientation, speaks about the two components in orientation: motivational and value orientations. Motivational orientation which supplies energy to be spent in action is three-fold:

- (i) *Cognitive*, corresponding to that which the actor perceives in a situation, in relation to his system of need-dispositions
- (ii) *Cathetic*, involving a process through which an actor invests an object with affective or emotional significance
- (iii) *Evaluative*, by means of which an actor allocates his energy to various interests among which he must choose

Value orientation, on the other hand, points to the observance of certain social norms or standards in contradiction to needs which are focal in the motivational orientation. Again, there are three modes of value orientation.

- (i) The value orientation which deals with the validity of judgement or *cognitive* orientation.
- (ii) Orientation which helps actors judge whether the response to the surrounding objects are appropriate or consistent is known as the *appreciative* orientation.

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- (iii) The orientation that helps an actor commit to his/her objects is known as *moral* orientation.

The three analytical systems, viz., the personality system, the social system and the cultural systems are all based on Parsons' schemes. Thus, behavioural and cultural aspects of role expectations are defined by the motivational and values orientations.

4.4 PATTERN VARIABLES

Pattern variables first emerged as a conceptual scheme for classifying types of roles in social systems starting with the distinction between professional and business roles. Later, the scheme was revised and its relevance extended from role analysis in the social system to the analysis of all types of systems of action. In Parsons' words, 'The pattern variable scheme defines a set of fine dichotomies. Any courses of action by an actor involves a pattern of choices with respect to these five sets of alternatives' and again, 'A pattern variable is a dichotomy, one side of which must be chosen by an actor before he can act with respect to that situation.' So, these five pattern variables derive directly from the frame of reference of the theory of action, and that in the sense that they are all thus derived, they constitute a system. With the help of pattern variables, one can categorize the orientation of personality types, values in cultures and standard models of the social structure. The pattern variables are:

- (1) **Affectivity–affective neutrality:** This concerns with the amount of emotion or effect that is appropriate in a given interaction situation.
- (2) **Self orientation–collective orientation:** Every action has a reason and a direction. The level or extent till which an action may be directed towards realizing individual or group goals is the self-orientation and collective orientation.
- (3) **Universalism–particularism:** This orientation points to the problem of whether evaluation and judgment of others in an interaction situation is to apply to all actors or whether all actors be assessed in terms of the same standards.
- (4) **Ascription–achievement:** This particular orientation deals with the issue of how to assess an actor, whether in terms of performance or on the basis of inborn qualities, such as sex, age, race and family status. So, basically this orientation debates whether an actor should assess another actor on the basis of his performance, or on the attributes and qualities he has.
- (5) **Specificity–diffuseness:** This orientation denotes the issues of how far reaching obligation in an interaction situation should be. Should the obligations be narrow and specific, or should they be extensive and diffused?

Thus, the pattern variables, apart from being dilemmas of choice that every actor confronts are also characteristics of value standards and a scheme for the

formulation of value standards. These pattern variables are also categories for description of value orientations, crucial components in the definition of role expectations, characterizations of differences of empirical structure of personalities or social systems. These are inherent patterns of cultural value orientation. A pattern variable in its cultural aspect is a normative pattern; in its personality aspect, a need, a disposition; and in its social system aspect a role expectation. Explaining the relationship between pattern variables, Parsons is of the opinion that the first three derive from the problems of primacy among the modes of orientation; the last two from indeterminate object situation. Parsons considers pattern variables to describe all kinds of social relationships. Business relationships and family relationships are, for example, polar opposites, differing in each set of variables. Business relationships are characterized by affective neutrality, specificity, universalism, performance-orientation and self-orientation. Family relationships are characterized by affectivity, diffuseness, particularism, quality and collective orientation.

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4.5 THEORY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

The social system is closely related to Parson's earlier work, *The Structure of Social Action*. Here in the social system the focus is an empirical generalization or methodology. Drawing from Max Weber's typological approach, Parsons views actors as oriented to situations in terms of motives. The social system is an attempt to bring together in systematic and generalized form, the main outlines of a conceptual scheme for the analysis of structure and processes of social system.

Parsons conceives of an actor who acts in terms of means and conditions and this actor has an object towards the act. Parsons maintained that individuals interact in conditions where the process becomes easy to investigate in a scientific sense. Then it is analysed using the same techniques that other sciences use to carry out their investigations. Parsons' notion of social system varies with different places. Social system, according to him, is defined as a plurality of individual actors interacting with one another. Again, the social system is described as a plurality of individuals who are motivated by a tendency to optimum gratification. Individuals also have relation to this situation that is defined in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared patterns. There are three types of motives. These are: (i) *cognitive* (ii) *cathectic* and (iii) *evaluative*. There are three corresponding types of values: (i) *cognitive* (ii) *appreciative* and (iii) *moral*. These modes of orientation create a composite type of action such as:

(i) Instrumental: These are actions oriented to realize explicit goals efficiently.

(ii) Expressive: In this type of orientation action is directed at realizing emotional satisfaction.

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- (iii) **Moral:** This type of orientation deals with actions concerned with realizing standards of right and wrong. Thus, the unit acts involve motivational and value orientation and have a general direction as a consequence of which combination of values and motives prevails for an actor.

According to Parsons, as variously oriented actors (in terms of their configuration of motivational and value orientation) interacted, they came to develop agreements and sustain patterns of interaction which became standards. Such standard patterns can be looked at as a social system. Actions may be composed of three 'interpenetrating action system'—the *cultural*, the *social* and the *personality*. Following both Durkheim and Radcliffe Brown's lead, Parsons views integration within and among the action system as a basic requisite for survival. Parsons was concerned with the integration within the social system itself and between social system and cultural patterns on the one hand, and between the social system and the personality system on the other. And for such integration to occur, at least two functional requisites had to be met.

- (i) A social system must have a sufficient proportion of its component actor adequately motivated to act in accordance with the requirements of its role system.
- (ii) Social system must avoid commitment to cultural patterns which either fail to define a minimum of order or which place impossible demands on people and thereby generate deviance and conflict.

Parsons was mainly concerned with cultural systems insofar as they affect social systems and personality. So a social system, according to him, is a mode of organization of *action elements* relative to the persistence or ordered processes of change of the interactive patterns of a plurality of individual actors. First, *act* is mentioned as a unit of social system. This act becomes a unit insofar as it becomes a process of interaction between its author and another actor. Secondly, for more macroscopic analysis of the social system, a higher order unit than an act, called the *status-role* is used.

Parsons maintained that all actors are involved in a number of interactions with other actors in a social system, giving rise to a complementary style of functioning. Thus, this participation of an actor in multiple relationships with systematic patterns makes up an important unit of social system. This participation, in turn, has two principal aspects. On one hand there is a *positional aspect*, i.e., where the actor is located in the social system which is called his *status*; on the other hand, there is a processual aspect, i.e., what the actor does in his relations with others seen in context of functional significance for the social system. This is called his *role*. The status role bundles are not, in general, attributes of the actors, but are units of the social system. An actor himself is considered as a unit of the social system as he holds a status or performs a role. So there are three different units of the social system. These are: (i) The social act, performed by an actor and oriented to one or more actors on objects; (ii) the actor's status-role; (iii) actor himself as a social unit.

The functional prerequisites of social systems are:

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- (i) **Adaptation:** This prerequisite refers to the relationship between the system and its environment. It involves the problem of securing, from the environment, sufficient facilities and then distributing these facilities throughout the system. At a minimum, food and shelter must be provided to fulfil physical needs. The economy is the institution primarily concerned with this function.
- (ii) **Goal attainment:** This particular prerequisite involves the determination of goals and motivating the members of the system to attain these goals. It also helps in mobilizing the members and of their energies for the achievement of these goals. Procedures for establishing goals and deciding on priorities between goals are standardized in the form of political system.
- (iii) **Integration:** Integration refers primarily to the adjustment of conflict. It denotes the problem of coordinating and maintaining viable interrelations among system units. The law is the main institution which meets this need. Legal norms define and standardize relations between individuals and between institutions and thus reduce the potential for conflict. When conflict does arise it is settled by the judicial system and does not, therefore, lead to disintegration of the social system.
- (iv) **Latency:** This prerequisite helps in managing tensions and maintaining social patterns within a social system. It also helps in storing, organizing and maintaining motivational energies of various elements present within such a system. Pattern maintenance refers to the maintenance of the basic pattern of values standardized by a particular society. Institutions which perform this function include the family, the educational system and religion. Tension-management concerns the problem of dealing with the internal tensions and strains of actors in the social system.

So the development of the four functional prerequisites has been abbreviated as AGIL (which indicates Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, Latency) which denotes a shift away from the analysis of structures to the analysis of functions. Parsons claims that a constant overlapping takes place between these functional prerequisites. This inter-penetration of one into the other is the hallmark of Parsons' social system. So it is said that due to these changes, society is in a *moving equilibrium*.

4.6 THEORY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Parsons became increasingly concerned with social change. He visualized that the energetic information exchanges among action systems provide the potential for change *within* or *between* the action systems as well. Parsons' views social change as a process of social evolution from simple to more complex forms of societies.

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He regards changes in adaptation as a major driving force of social evolution. Such change may be brought about by excess energy or information during the process of exchange within action systems. These excesses modify the energy or information crossing over to the other action system. On the other hand, insufficient information or structure may also change or affect the action system in some way. Motivation, for example, would definitely change the way actors behave and eventually affect the cultural orientation of the social system.

Parson drew heavily from Durkheim and Spencer's teachings on social change and development and laid out the following elements of processes of evolution.

- (i) The system units are classified into patterns that display dependence on each other in order to complete system functions.
- (ii) In differentiating systems, new components and principles that facilitate integration are established.
- (iii) Within given environments, the adaptive capacity of these systems of differentiations are increased.

Evolution involves distinguishing between personalities as well as the cultural, social, and organismic systems in the perspectives of action theory. Secondly, the distinction within these sub-systems affects the integration and formation of new structures that boosts integration. The distinctions also influence the improvement of the survival capacity of action sub-systems and their overall functions within a specific environment.

Stages of evolution, according to Parsons, bring about the formation of a new set of problems in the integration between society and culture. With every passing stage, these systems have been influenced and modified to become internally distinct as well as distinct from each other. To him, the history of human society from the simple hunting and gathering group to the complex nation state represents an increase in the *general adaptive capacity* of society. As societies evolve into more complex forms, control over the environment increases. While economic changes might provide an initial stimulus, Parsons believed that in the long run, the cultural changes, i.e., changes in values, determine the broadest patterns of change.

Thus, Parsons opines that social evolution involves a process of differentiation. The institutions and roles which form the social system become increasingly differentiated and specialized in term of their function. As the parts of society become more and more specialized and distinct, it becomes increasingly difficult to integrate them in terms of common values. And despite social differentiation, social integration and order are maintained by the generating of values. Parsons admits that his views on social evolution represent little more than a beginning. However, they do offer a possible solution to the problem of explaining social change from a functionalist perspective. Parsons has constitutently emphasized the necessity of developing a systematic, general theory of human behaviour. He views the development of abstract theory as the principal index of maturity of a science. Such theory facilitates description, analysis and empirical research.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is Parsons' contribution to sociology?
2. When does a behaviour become an action?
3. What problems does evolution of the social structure bring?

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4.7 ROBERT K. MERTON

Robert K. Merton was born in Philadelphia, USA, on 4 July 1910. He was introduced to sociology by George E. Simpson of the Temple University, Philadelphia. His immediate community and his life in southern Philadelphia influenced his sociological theories. The sociological community perceives Merton as a devout academian, primarily a scholar involved in the disinterested search for truth, with reason as his major tool. Merton is conceived of as a functional analyst concerned with sociological understanding produced by research of objective, latent patterns inherent in social life. Merton, being a central figure in the theoretical development of American sociology, was influenced both by Parsons and Sorokin, though Parson's impact was more pronounced in his works.

However, while Merton held a broadly functional perspective his path began to diverge from that of Parsons as he refined the method of functional analysis. He rejected Parsons' ideology of developing an inclusive kind of theory and embraced the middle path of analysing a limited set of practical phenomena. He argued that in view of the general status of sociological knowledge and theory, Parsons' enterprises was over ambitious. For Merton, such grand theoretical schemes are premature, since the theoretical and empirical groundwork necessary for their completion have not been performed. Merton emphasized on the need to examine dysfunctional social systems along with functional ones, thereby negating the rigid outlook of former functional theories. In relation to this, he propounded new paradigms and a protocol for introducing a fresh approach to traditional functional theories. He also debated Malinowski's theory that a social function was required for all social phenomena. According to Merton, sociology in the present state of its development required theories of middle range. Such theories should be grounded in empirical data and at the same time should use concepts which are clearly defined and practical.

4.7.1 Theory of Social Structure and Paradigm of Functional Analysis

Merton identifies the central orientation of functionalism as the practice of interpreting data by establishing their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated. Functional analysis involves the search for functions. His functional orientation is a shift from a static towards a dynamic image of society. His functionalism is very different from the classical functionalism of Comte and

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Spencer's sociology, Brown's cultural anthropology and from Parson's functional structuralism. Merton saw functional theorizing as embracing three basic postulates which are:

- (i) **The functional unity of society:** The assumption in this postulate is that an entire social and cultural system uses a typical social activity. However, this holds true only when we take a uniform, homogeneous system with perfectly integrated elements. The practical entity of integration varies with different types of systems and even within the same systems it keeps changing from time to time. So it is questionable that all human societies must have some degree of integration. Merton, however, views that the degree of integration is an issue to be empirically determined; so the degree to which functional unity exists in the social system is a matter subject to empirical investigation.
- (ii) **Universal functionalism:** This postulate holds that all social and cultural items fulfil sociological functions. This assumption implies an image of society in which there are no dispensable or irrelevant elements. For Merton, if an examination of an actually existing system is undertaken, it would be clear that there is a wide range of empirical possibilities.
- (iii) **Functional indispensability:** Merton focuses on the alleged indispensability of particular cultural or social forms for fulfilling a particular function in a social system. So according to Merton, all parts are functional, i.e., the existence of all parts is essential for the survival of the social system. Hence, all parts are functionally indispensable. Merton contends that such conclusions that have been taken for granted by various functionalists are not required as can be seen from practical evidence. He proposes an alternative assumption which he considers a basic theorem of functional analysis. According to him, just as the same item may have multiple functions, similarly, the same function can be diversely fulfilled by alternative items. So Merton postulated the importance of functional analysis as a concern with various types of functional alternatives or functional equivalents within the social system.

4.8 MIDDLE-RANGE THEORY

Merton developed the notion of middle-range theory as the theoretical goal suitable for the contemporary epoch of sociology. He conceives of sociological theory as logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived. To Merton, the theories of middle range are 'theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day to day research and all inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organization and social change'. These are used primarily to guide empirical inquiry. Examples of middle-range theories are the theory of reference groups, the theory of relative