

**Classical Sociology Theory**  
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**Lecture - 44**  
**Critical Assessment**

Welcome back to the class. This is the last class on Weber. We are having a critical assessment or a critical evaluation of Max Weber and his overall contributions to the discipline of sociology.

We have had several sessions, I think, nine classes including this. We could spend some time in discussing Weber in a rather elaborate manner, trying to understand his overall contribution for the methodological as well as the substantive theoretical contributions of Weber, and let us have a look at Weber.

Let us have a critical evaluation at Weber, a critical assessment at Weber, trying to position Weber among the different sociologists and try to understand to what extent Weberian arguments and Weberian theories have stood the time, and to what extent they have influenced the course of the discipline and its trajectory over these decades.

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- Weber did not believe that timeless, universal laws could ever be developed because so much that had occurred in history was the result of chance events.



- Even without the ability to conduct inquiry in the same way as in the natural sciences, Weber still wanted to be scientific and objective.
- Moreover, he sought to do more than write historical descriptions; he also wanted to provide a methodology for more abstract and analytical statements.

- The result was a strange compromise: the study of historical causes through the vehicle of ideal types.



One of the very important points is about the nature of theorization of Weber. Weber did not believe that timeless universal laws could ever be developed because so much that had occurred in history was the result of chance events. You know, this is something very fascinating, maybe for the first time that you are listening to a scholar who very explicitly states that he does not

want to or he does not believe in creating huge theories or very all-encompassing theories, a kind of timeless theories or laws for that matter, which can be applicable to every society.

Because you know that this has been the trend ever since the time of Montesquieu or Auguste Comte to Spencer, even Durkheim, and Karl Marx, all of them exhibited this urge to develop meta-theories, theories that can explain almost everything according to them.

But here comes Weber and makes them much humbler, much important at the same time, important invention saying that a timeless universal law could ever be developed because so much had occurred in history was the result of chance events. A host of things which had happened in different societies with chance events. They were not really created by conscious human events; they were not really created by a set of people who wanted to achieve certain things. On the other hand, they were simply chance events.

You cannot have a theory that cannot really look into each of the specificities. On the other hand, what Weber says is that the trajectories of different societies are so different, the historical, social, political, cultural, background or cultural contexts of different societies are so different that it is almost impossible to create a law that can include, that can incorporate all these diversities and all these complexities.

Without the ability to conduct inquiry into the same ways as in the natural sciences, Weber still wanted to be scientific and objective. His argument is that you cannot really replicate social science or you cannot really mold or fashion social science after a natural science. You cannot have a social physics, you cannot have a sociology which looks exactly like a physics. It is not a weakness, rather, it is a strength; that is a point Weber argues.

You cannot have a law. You cannot have sociological laws like the laws in chemistry or in physics or in biology or in astronomy. You cannot have that because there are so much of different complexities, there are there are so many different contingencies and chance events and complexities, and you cannot have that.

Even without the ability to conduct inquiry in the same way as the natural sciences, Weber still wanted to be scientific and objective. So this is the point. We mentioned already in the previous class that Weber brings in a very strong anti-positivistic streak. He brings in a very strong anti-positivistic orientation to social sciences, and especially that of sociology. But at the same time,

he wants it to be scientific as well as objective. I hope you remember we had some elaborate discussion on what it means to be objective and what it means to be scientific.

Moreover, he sought to do more than write historical descriptions. He also wanted to provide a methodology for more abstract and analytical statements. So it was not only a sociologist trying to do a historical analysis of certain things, but he went into more nuances and one of the best examples is his study on capitalism, as we have discussed elaborately.

Weber, was not merely tracing the origin of capitalism. It was not the study of the emergence of capitalism. I hope you understand that, there are quite a lot of economic historians have done that and how and where did you know capitalism emerged, what were the major players, who were the major players, what happened, what were the policies that comes in the in the realm of economic history, whereas Weber was interested in a sociological analysis, trying to understand how certain religious beliefs, certain cultural elements, certain ethics really gave a kind of impetus for emergence of capitalism.

He also provide a methodology for the more abstract and analytical statements about the historical changes. That is why this concept of ideal type becomes important. He presents the story, he presents the image of the spirit of capitalism in its ideal-typical formulations.

Then he argues, and tries to understand what is the ideal-typical characterization of a protestant ethic and he could make a connection between that. The result was a strange compromise, the study of historical causes through the vehicle of ideal types. Exactly what we discussed now.

He tried to understand the historical causes of different subjects, but different phenomena, but through the vehicle of ideal types. And you can have a lot of discussions and debates about the positive as well as negative effects of using this ideal type. But Weber personally found it as extremely important.

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- Jurgen Habermas thinks that Weber's discussion of "the paradoxes of rationalization is still the best key to a philosophically and scientifically informed diagnosis of our time."
- Weber sees distinctive ethical dilemmas for contemporary individuals, exemplified in the tension between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction.
- He is also a cultural relativist, for he thinks that science cannot decide what values people should follow, that our belief systems cannot be based on any ultimate truth.



Now, Jurgen Habermas, maybe one of the most important leading intellectuals of our times, the German philosopher. Habermas thinks that Weber's discussion of the paradoxes of rationalization is still the best key to a philosophically and scientifically informed diagnosis of our culture. It is Habermas's argument that Weber's explanation or Weber's theory, on the paradox of rationalization.

What is the paradox of rationalization that we discussed the other day? I hope you remember that. Weber argued that in the modern times, things are becoming more and more rationalized, we are aiming for more and more efficiency. But in this pursuit for more and more efficiency, there lot of substantive values are lost in between. You cannot have a highly value-oriented as well as a highly rationalized goal-oriented means at the same time. They may not go together.

Remember, Weberian discussion on social action, he distinguishes value-oriented action from that of goal-oriented action. Goal-oriented action is the typical instrumental rationalist action where your only goal is to achieve your destination, your end in the most efficient manner. Whereas when it becomes the kind of goal-oriented manner, your means are not that important.

Your ultimate aim, your upholding of the values, your commitment to the values becomes important and they are not compatible all the time. I am not saying they are completely incompatible but they are not compatible all the time. So Weber sees distinctive, ethical dilemma

of contemporary individuals exemplified in the tension between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction.

So this is a kind of a conflict that Habermas talks about, the kind of a paradox which is, which according to him is a philosophically and scientifically informed diagnosis of our time. What is this ethical dilemma of the contemporary individuals exemplified in the tension between ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction?

A conviction, it talks about your conviction towards a certain value. It is a substantive rationalization. I hope you remember this distinction between substantive and form and it is very difficult to have both these things together. You are in your everyday practices, you are ideologically committed to that, at the same time, formally as well.

This dilemma between the ethics of responsibility that you need to do certain things in the most efficient way, but at the same time, your convictions might be different. And this dilemma, Weber argues, is something very important.

He is also a cultural relativist, for he thinks that science cannot decide what values people should follow, that our belief systems cannot be based on any ultimate truth. A very important argument that which many of his predecessors failed to understand that you cannot really explain, of course, you can explain a lot of things with science but you cannot really explain larger questions, you can't explain philosophical questions through science.

For example, the whole question about the purpose of life, what is an ethical way of life? How should you behave? Should you behave this way or should you behave that way? What are the kind of values that you need to uphold? Science does not have answers to any of these things. What are the kind of a moral and ethical positions that you need to uphold, both at your individual as well as at your collective life? Science does not have any answer to that.

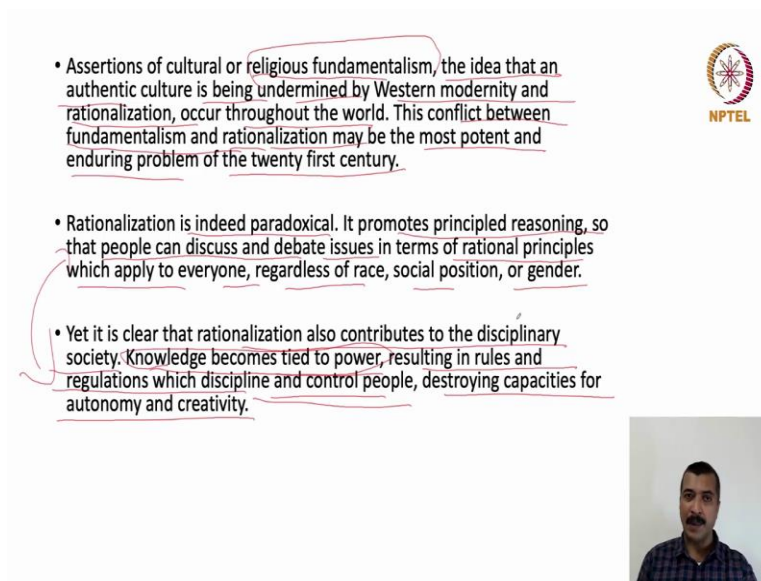
So science gives you a lot of information, it gives a lot of knowledge but when human life is not only on the base of knowledge, but it is also on the base of values. Weber recognized and realized it.

So what values people should follow that our belief system cannot be based on the ultimate truth. You cannot again, we know that science does not have or science does not give you an ultimate truth. Science keeps on revising its truths. Maybe today's truth could be tomorrow's false.

Science does not give you that sense of certitude. Science does not give you that sense of permanence. Whereas for a strong believer, if he keeps away his doubt, whether the basis of his belief is right or not but then he gets complete satisfaction of conviction of holding on to something that he thinks is absolutely correct.

At the psychological level, that conviction provides him with quite a lot of solace. It provides him with quite a lot of comfort, rather than, on the other hand, for a scientist, for somebody who believes in science, these truths are not permanent. Today's truth could become tomorrow's known-truth or could be a false.

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The slide contains three bullet points with red underlines and a red bracket on the left side. The first bullet point discusses cultural or religious fundamentalism. The second bullet point discusses rationalization. The third bullet point discusses the disciplinary society. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a star-like pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it. In the bottom right corner, there is a small portrait of a man with a mustache wearing a blue shirt.

- Assertions of cultural or religious fundamentalism, the idea that an authentic culture is being undermined by Western modernity and rationalization, occur throughout the world. This conflict between fundamentalism and rationalization may be the most potent and enduring problem of the twenty first century.
- Rationalization is indeed paradoxical. It promotes principled reasoning, so that people can discuss and debate issues in terms of rational principles which apply to everyone, regardless of race, social position, or gender.
- Yet it is clear that rationalization also contributes to the disciplinary society. Knowledge becomes tied to power, resulting in rules and regulations which discipline and control people, destroying capacities for autonomy and creativity.

Assertions of cultural or religious fundamentalism, the idea that an authentic culture is being undermined by Western modernity and rationalization occur throughout the world. This conflict between fundamentalism and rationalization may be the most potent and enduring problem of the 21st century.

Here, the attention is now being brought into a very important process that we see all throughout, which makes a lot of sense if you analyze it through Weberian argument. I hope you remember,

we mentioned about re-enchantment of the world, where the argument that there is an increased relevance of religion or religion has made a comeback.

In fact, it has made a comeback with vengeance since 1970s at least. Because contrary to quite a lot of sociologist's argument or political scientists' argument that the whole world is going through a process of secularization, where religion will lose its significance and it will become a part of your private life, what has happened after 1970s is religion has come back into the public sphere usually through its core, its combination with religion and political power.

We saw that phenomenon in India, we saw it in several Muslim countries of several Islamic societies, and we saw the resurgence of religious revivalism. So the point is many of these revivalist tendencies has a long history because they are and there has been very interesting argument that most of these revivalism or most of these, they emerged from a kind of a contestations with the Western rationality. If you look into quite lot of religious reformist movements, in within Islam or within Hinduism, all of them emerged as a reaction to the influence of colonial modernity.

On one hand, what has happened is it has assumed the character of a fundamentalism. And here, you need to keep in mind that we are not talking about fundamentalism in a negative sense.

What is the meaning of fundamentalism? We often attribute this term fundamentalism in a very rather negative way but fundamentalism, especially religious fundamentalism needs to be seen as an urge to go back to the fundamentals of any religion. There is a newly found call or a renewed call to from a religion to its members you have to go back to the fundamentals, to cling on to the fundamentals more vigorously.

And this comes when the elites or the priests think that the community has degenerated, both politically, socially, and economically. The prime reason for this degeneration is that the community has moved away from the, from its core values and core principles. So that is a time when the clergy exhort its members, or the priest exhort its members or the elites exhort their members to get back to the fundamentals. That is how every fundamentalist movements emerge.

But the tragedy or the kind of an irony is that they will be forced to identify or forced to create a set of fundamentals in a completely different context because many of these fundamentals of every religion that were identified, they will have to be there in the text that is written or in their

holy book that is written several centuries ago, and they might be quite vague, they might be quite abstract, they might be quite contradictory. Now, they have to reinvent all these things and make them suitable for the contemporary times and that creates quite a lot of tension.

This conflict between fundamentalism and rationalization, maybe the most potent and enduring problem of the 21st century. Rationalization is indeed paradoxical, it promotes principle reasoning so that people can discuss and debate issues in terms of rational principles which apply to everyone regardless of race, social position, or gender.

This is our understanding; it very closely comes to Habermasian understanding of public sphere. You use your rationality, so you evaluate certain things only on the basis of this rationality, you have emerged as a modern man or a woman, as a modern citizen who is kind of freed themselves from all the shackles of all the influences of tradition. Their thinking is very straight, they are no longer influenced by tradition, nor are they influenced by religion or blind beliefs or magic, they purely think plainly on the basis of rationality.

Again, we know that it hardly happens but, so that is supposed to create a kind of a space of principled reasoning. But it is clear that rationalization also contributed to the disciplinary society. Knowledge becomes tied to power, resulting in rules and regulations which discipline and control people destroying capacities for autonomy and creativity.

This is a tragedy of modernity. Modernity promised you a lot of unfettered freedom. Modernity believed in human potential and individualism, but if you look, if you analyze the trajectory of modern societies over the past several decades, we know that we are living in a disciplinary society. A theory heavily contributed or heavily influenced by Michel Foucault, where he talks about each of these connections, the whole connection between knowledge becomes tied to power and resulting in rules and regulations which discipline and control people.

I am not going into that field but it is a very fascinating area, Foucault's argument about disciplinary society, how we are disciplined, how we are made docile bodies, how education, health, medical knowledge, legal knowledge, and various mechanisms of controlling the population; how all these things have made human beings very docile; very tamed, very easy to control, easy to manipulate.



So there is a contradiction here. Weber argues that the more and the more you become modern, the more free you are because you are using rationality. On the other hand, we are increasingly becoming a disciplinary society, both at the hands of the state as well as by the hands of these multinational corporations. We know that the whole debate about how our privacy in the 21st century has really become a joke, is not it? Your most important personal data must already, must have been shared or collected by whomever they want in the in this era.

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- While he supported aspects of women's emancipation in Germany, he did not analyze the ideal of women's domesticity that arose during his era, despite his sensitivity to cultural values, He seems to have taken masculinity and femininity for granted.
- Weber's sober rationalism and his theory of rationalization still have elements of a moral tale, a story that reflected many taken-for-granted European assumptions of the time, rather than a scientific treatise on society. Ideas of progress, the superiority of the West over the East, and the good middle class versus the irresponsible workers, sometimes creep into his analysis.



While he supported another interesting question is about women's case. While he supported aspects of women's emancipation in Germany, he did not analyze the ideal women's domesticity as an ideal of women's domesticity that arose during his era. Despite his sensitivity to cultural values, he seemed to have taken masculinity and femininity for granted.

This is again a very important feminist critique of Weber because feminism offers very powerful critique of scholars, especially of this particular era because they have had, they had not developed a feminist perspective during that particular time. They did not think through that, they did not think about that because he did not analyze the ideal of women's domesticity.

They had taken for granted arguments that men are supposed to go out and then engage in public sphere and then work and then bring back money, whereas women are supposed to take care of the domestic affairs. Why? Because women are naturally inclined to be at home, they are more

homely, they are more kind, they are more loving they are the nurturing people, they give birth to children.

Women need to be stay in back at home and men need to go out. And this was the kind of a well-accepted cultural trope in every society, including India, including Europe, most of societies. Weber also passively accepted that he did not question or he did not deem it necessary even to discuss that.

Weber's sober rationalism and his theory of rationalization still have element of a moral tale, a story that reflected many taken for granted European assumptions of the time, rather than a scientific treatise on society; ideas of progress, the superior to the West over the East, and the good middle class versus the irresponsible workers sometimes creep into his analysis.

Again, very interesting thing because Weber, very steadfastly, he tries to keep away from the moral positions, unlike Durkheim. We know Durkheim had a very specific moral position, he believed that a discipline like sociology must take moral and ethical positions, whereas Weber did not do that.

Weber, he did not take any particular moral position, but the same time, as we discussed in the previous class, he had that kind of an orientalist outlook. He believed in this idea of progress as distributed, generated, and distributed by the Europeans, and the superiority of the West over the east, the good middle class versus the irresponsible workers. Because middle class, they have the ability to think rationally, whereas the working class the poor people, they do not have this faculty and sometimes they creep into his analysis.

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- Weber, more than Marx or Durkheim, sees history as a contingent process and focuses on concrete histories and cultures in his historical sociology. He does not advocate a simple evolutionary model, though his ideas about rationalization seem to sometimes suggest such a logic.



- Weber is a more postmodern thinker than either Marx or Durkheim. He ties knowledge to power, he recognizes the links between rationality and social control, and he is suspicious of claims that conflicts between social groups can be eradicated in a morally integrated community.



Weber, more than Marx or Durkheim, sees history as a contingent process and focuses on concrete histories and cultures in his historical sociology. He does not advocate a simple evolutionary model, though his ideas about rationalization seem to suggest such a logic. This is something that we discussed in the previous class.

Weber is not fond of formulating all-encompassing meta-theories. He does not want to provide a theory and say that, okay, you can use this theory to explain social change so far in every society. They are very two tall claims and he does not believe in that.

He sees history as a contingent process, lot of chances take place, and lot of chance events take place. And focuses on concrete histories and cultures in his historical sociology, and this is the most important one. While Karl Marx also attempted that, he had, he analyzed the history of working-class in Britain very elaborately. But then he extrapolated that with the rest of the society, whereas Weber will not do that.

Weber argues that every society has undergone very specific and contingent historical events and you cannot gloss over them, you cannot build a theory without addressing them specifically, without analyzing them specifically, and such a theory will not have any importance.

He does not advocate a simple evolutionary model, though his ideas about rationalization seem to suggest such a logic. He does not talk about different stages. He does not say that every other society will become like human society. But still when you think about rationalization, and when

he connects it with the story of modernization, I think it is pretty clear that he also falls under that trap.

Weber is a more postmodern thinker than either Marx or Durkheim. He ties knowledge to power, he recognizes the link between rationality and social control, and he is suspicious of the claims that conflict between social groups can be eradicated in a morally integrated community.

Because many of the widest, most hotly debated topics of contemporary times, the connection between knowledge and power, the relationship between freedom and disciplinary society; all these things get reflected in Weberian analysis. His ties of knowledge to power, he has recognized the link between rationality and social control. Increasingly, in a modern society, we are subjected to increasing forms of surveillance and control.

His suspicion of the claim that conflicts between social groups can be eradicated in a morally-integrated community as in the case of the Durkheim. Durkheim believed in that, he does not believe in that. So these discussions really revealed that the Weber was somebody who thinks beyond his time, and he was quite sharp to understand the kind of a possible trajectory of his theorization.

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- Yet Weber does not recognize the possibility that societies might be able to develop non-religious ethical positions in a secular world. For Weber, rationality disenchant, it undermines strong moral beliefs.
- In addition, Weber does not discuss the complexity of cultural identity, the psyche, and social interaction with as much sophistication as he might.
- Weber does not explore exactly how bureaucratic rules are followed, how a shared sense of what rules mean is developed. These rules are created and sustained in a cultural context, not by isolated individuals who have no connections with one another.



Yet Weber does not recognize the possibility that societies might be able to develop non-religious ethical positions in a secular world. For Weber, rationality disenchant, it undermines strong moral beliefs. That is another very important point. He believed that rationality will

undermine strong moral beliefs and replacing religion with nothing. That seems to be a problematic position because no society can live without moral positions. And these moral positions can be quite different. For example, there are very interesting studies, which suggest that quite a lot of developed societies, especially the Nordic societies, including Sweden, Denmark, and these societies, they are increasingly becoming irreligious. They are increasingly becoming either atheistic societies or where people do not really care about religion. Religion is not a matter of interest for them.

These are the places which has the lowest amount of crime, lowest amount of human rights abuses, and the highest human development indices. So what does it explain? Scholars have argued that these societies where religion has been made disappear, alternative value systems have taken over. Sense of equality, sense of human rights, and sense of individual right have provided a kind of an important basis for your ethical standing.

Weber did not believe in a non-religious ethical position. For Weber, rationality disenchant and undermines strong moral beliefs. But of course, these societies are disenchanted societies but they have something to replace the religion. And it is not that they are enchanted by these ideas of freedom or equality or human rights, but rather, they have taken it as an ingrained value in their everyday life.

In addition, Weber does not discuss the complexity of cultural identity, the psyche, and the social interaction with such sophistication as he might have. So he does not look into cultural identity, he does not look into the questions of races or gender or ethnicity or such kind of things, and the psyche and social interaction with much sophistication as he might have done.

Weber does not explore exactly how bureaucratic rules are followed, how a shared sense of what rules mean is developed. Of course, we know that he developed only an ideal-typical construct of bureaucracy. While he was absolutely clear that you are not going to see such a completely perfect bureaucracy anywhere in the world, but he did not examine it by himself. He left it for others, he left it for maybe his students or the future generation sociologists to sociologically, empirically analyze how bureaucracies actually work.

These rules were created and sustained in a cultural context, not by isolated individuals who were, who have no connection with one another. So how bureaucracy function in different

societies is a very interesting study. How the functions of bureaucracies heavily influenced by certain cultural underpinnings. It is a very fascinating area of study, Weber did not venture into that but that would have been really interesting.

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- While Weber calls for the methodological practice of *Verstehen*, the sympathetic understanding of others as a central part of sociological analysis, he does not sufficiently explore the fluid, creative, and contingent aspects of social interaction which escape scientific categories.



- It is hard to extract a general theory from Weber; rather, what emerge are rich descriptions, ideal types of empirical cases, and complex causal statements on many topics without a general model to guide us.



While Weber calls for the methodological practice of *Verstehen*, the sympathetic understanding of others as central part of sociological analysis, he does not sufficiently explore the fluid, creative, and contingent aspects of social interaction which escaped scientific categories.

Now, because he was very particular that every scientist must be able to objectively analyze the subjective dispositions of anchors. But there are host of areas where this objective analysis becomes difficult or rather impossible, we discussed that in the previous class. You will not be able to completely execute this objectivity because of your position, your identities, your belief systems, and the impossibility that you cannot extricate yourself from your cultural milieu. It is impossible how much ever professionally trained you are, you can only try your maximum.

Weber does not look into that there are quite a lot of, he does not certainly explore the fluid, creative, and contingent aspects of social interaction, which escape scientific categories. There are a lot of terms, categories which you cannot study scientifically at all.

You cannot study suffering, for example. How do you scientifically study suffering? How do we scientifically study pain? How do we sufficiently study the whole cause of memories; daunting; haunting memories, how do we scientifically study? How do we scientifically study trauma,

trauma experienced by a community, or because of some, say, religious violence or some natural calamity or something? How do we scientifically study that?

Is there any point in trying to scientifically study that? Why should somebody study it scientifically? Why should somebody study and then quantify pain experienced by a group of people or violence experienced by people? Can we quantify violence on the basis of number of people who are killed, number of people who are seriously injured, does it make that study in anything better?

So later, sociologists have identified that or argued that there are a host of very important central features of human society, human existence, which cannot be or which need not be studied scientifically. You do not need to make even this claim that you need to love. You cannot study it scientifically. Compassion, you cannot study scientifically. A sense of serving somebody, you cannot study it scientifically. There is no need for that. Science is not that important that every scholar must use its framework to understand that.

It is hard to extract a general theory of Weber. Another very common observation on Weber is that it is very hard to extract a general theory from Weber rather, what emerges are rich descriptions, ideal types of empirical cases, and complex causal statements on many topics without a general model to guide us.

We can say it as a critic but that is how a scholar Weber was. We know that we discussed about his personal biography, he had a lot of personal difficulties, he had a mental breakdown, and he was out of academia for two decades. So all these things must have influenced, must have prevented from him from coming out with something more methodical. But so, and his writings are also kind of highly disorganized, unconnected, disconnected with each other. So it is very difficult to get a kind of complete grasp of Weber.

But if you try to summarize, if you try to evaluate Weber, I do not think that I need to reiterate the importance of Weber; you must have already understood that. He is a person of eminent standing, who is always seen as one of the trinities of modern sociology; the trinities of modern sociology, along with Durkheim and Marx. Somebody who could definitely provided a shift in the preoccupation with the positivistic science.

He initiated an anti-positivistic methodological orientation for sociology and his dialogue with the Marx, his contribution to the study of religion, his central theme of rationality, his arguments about action, his arguments about authority, all are very fascinating theories. And that is why Weber still continues to be one of the most influential classical thinkers ever in the field of bureaucracy, action, authority, religion, modernity; Weber is still a central figure.

I hope you have followed the classes. I would strongly urge you to read more on Weber. He is a very fascinating scholar and follow the discussion that we had closely. Thank you for listening. Let us close the class today. Thank you.