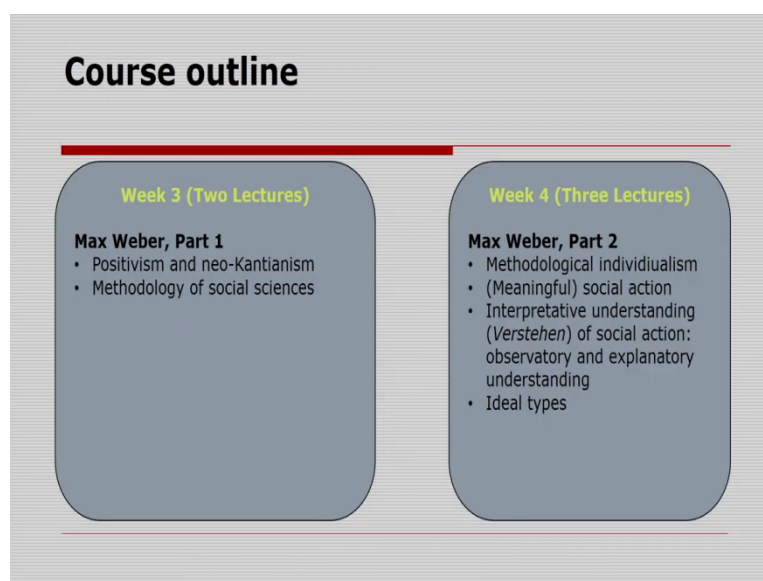


**Philosophical Foundations of Social Research**  
**Professor Sambit Mallick**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati**  
**Week 4 (Max Weber- 2) : Lecture – 08**  
**Interpretive Sociology**

Hello everyone. Welcome to the massive open online course on Philosophical Foundations of Social Research. We have completed the lectures of three weeks: we have completed the history of the philosophy of the social sciences, empiricism and rationalism, Auguste Comte and his law of three stages starting from theological stage to metaphysical stage to positivistic or scientific stage, and we have discussed the relationship between epistemology and ontology.

And in the second week, we have discussed Émile Durkheim's the rules of the sociological method, influence of Sciences on sociology, objectivity in social sciences, social facts and the autonomy of sociology as a discipline, autonomy of knowledge and the necessity of science, common Sense and science, science and ideology, science and religion and so on within comparative social framework, and how Durkheim was influenced by Spenserian organic analogy and precursor to functionalism, functionalism as reciprocity and complementarity of roles in the social division of labour, that is how Durkheim tried to visualize functions. After the second week, we have divided Max Weber's contributions to philosophical foundations of Social Research into two parts.



In the first part of where Weberian contributions to methodologies in social sciences, we have divided into two parts, one is in the form of how Weber's theoretical positions and

methodological writings are usually characterized as effecting a reconciliation between positivist and Neo Kantian positions, his reflections on the methodology of the social sciences.

And in this fourth week, in terms of three lectures, we are going to discuss the second part of Max Weber. Please do not think that these parts are dichotomous in nature, no way. The only thing is that just for the sake of convenience of this course, we have divided Max Weber's contributions to methodologies in social sciences into two parts, that is all.

In these three lectures, we are going to discuss Weber's methodological individualism, social action, typology of social action: traditional social action, effective or emotive social action, value rational social action and goal rational social action, which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

And whether all forms of social actions, they lead to meaningful social action or not, we will see then we will discuss in this week, interpretative understanding of social action, verstehen which implies understanding verstehen whether it is a method or not or only it is an objective or a goal or an achievement to interpret the actor's meanings, and how interpretative understanding of social action can be divided into two parts, direct understanding and indirect understanding.

Direct understanding is alternatively known as observatory understanding, and indirect understanding is alternatively known as explanatory understanding of social actions. Then we will discuss ideal types and how Weber tries to define culture, how interpretation will be at the level of textual or linguistic meaning of cultural product, how value interpretation is done : that may be social value, that may be cognitive value that may be aesthetic value and so on.

How Weber tries to look at selection in the process of research design, what is the basis of selection, what is the basis of adequacy, what is the basis of generalizations and how experience helps us generalize various phenomena at hand and then how Weber tried to look at explanation at the level of meaning as well as at the level of statistical generalizations.

Then we will discuss economic phenomena, economically relevant phenomena and economically conditioned phenomena. And in terms of three lectures, we are going to discuss this, in this week.

## Max Weber

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### □ Reconciliation between:

#### Positivism:

Supremacy of  
science over  
non-sciences

#### Neo-Kantianism:

Our knowledge of  
the world is  
constructed, and  
hence subject to  
selection and  
interpretation

In the last lecture we have discussed how Weber's methodological writings are reconciliation between positivism and Neo Kantianism: positivism suggests supremacy of science over non sciences, and on the contrary Neo Kantianism suggests that our knowledge of the social world is constructive knowledge and hence is subject to selection and interpretation. That is why when knowledge is subject to interpretation, then there cannot be any exact knowledge as positivists argued.

## Max Weber

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- Value relevance
- Interpretative understanding
- Cultural sciences differ from the natural sciences in the distinctive role of valuations in the formation of the concepts and in the distinctive type of knowledge

And we have also discussed value relevance interpretative understanding, and how cultural sciences differ from the natural sciences in the distinctive role of valuations in the formation of the concepts and the distinctive type of knowledge involved in them. The third area, which is important in Weberian framework is the idealizations in the cultural sciences.

We also have discussed methodology of the social sciences in the Weberian and framework ; how ethical neutrality in sociology and economics, objectivity in social science and social policy and critical studies in the logic of cultural sciences, objective possibility and adequate causation in historical explanations, they constitute the methodology of the social sciences by Weber.

## **Interpretative sociology**

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Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a *science* which attempts the *interpretative understanding of social action* in order thereby to arrive at a *causal explanation* of its course and effects.

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## **Social action**

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- Understanding and explanation of social action
  - Distinction between individual social action and supra-individual entities
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And in today's lecture what we are going to discuss, we are going to discuss Weber's interpretative sociology and social action. For Weber, sociology as a disciplinary formation is a combination of theoretical construct as well as methodological device.

How they have originated and what are the techniques, what are the strategies? There is a difference between technique and strategy: a technique is short term, whereas strategy is long term. What are the methods and techniques and strategies combined together constitute the

methods within social sciences. Sociology as a theoretical construct as well as a methodological device is an attempt to understand the dramatic transformations that Western Europe experienced between the mid 18th century and the mid 20th century.

And when I said dramatic transformations, and these dramatic transformations, dramatic changes or dramatic shifts, they may be characterized in terms of our economy, in terms of our culture, in terms of our quality and so on.

## **Interpretative sociology**

Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a *science* which attempts the *interpretative understanding of social action* in order thereby to arrive at a *causal explanation* of its course and effects.

When you look at economic shifts, the transformation of agriculture into a profit oriented and increasingly technological activity with the marginalization of farm labourers, and tenant farmers and their flight to the growing urban centres population. Economic shifts also suggests that development of large scale industrial manufacturing processes, the corresponding decline of artisanal and home production and the rise of trade unions.

Economic shift also suggests increasingly global dimensions of trade, as more and more of the world is drawn into the global economy and the non European world is increasingly turned into colonial possessions designed to supply cheap or free labour, basic commodities and protected markets for the Imperial centre.

Then there are three economic shifts that we generally witnessed: Weber tried to capture that transformation of agricultural economy to a more industrial economy, shift of rural population to urban centres, then development of secondary development of large scale manufacturing processes, decline of artisanal sector, handloom gives way to power looms sectors and so on, and the rise of trade unions because of industrial revolution and so on. And

because of conflicting nature between two important factors of production, namely labour and capital.

And thirdly, increasingly global dimensions of trade and how non European world is increasingly turned into colonial possessions designed to supply cheap or free labour, as India has been supplying free or cheap labour; India was supplying cheap or free labour during colonialism and now also India is a market hub of cheap or free labour force to serve the interests of imperialism. When I said the non European world is increasingly turned into colonial possessions designed to supply cheap or free labour, basic commodities and protected markets for the Imperial centre.

We not only provide cheap or free labour, but also we provide raw materials so that the colonizers, the imperialist countries, they have been supplying us with finished goods. At the level of cultural transformation, what we have been observing that the spread of literacy via developing mass education systems and the increasing significance of print media, participation of individuals in National Cultural formation. Dominant languages, increasingly marginalized other languages and dialects. And the system of social control represented by the official religious institutions breaks down particularly in urban centres.

At the political level that political changes that we tend to witness, democratic movements make monarchic and aristocratic power, increasingly untenable and even authoritarian government increasingly requires the active participation of its citizens to sustain itself.

Again at the political level, that we tend to witness is that the capacity of the government, the capacity of the state to intervene is transformed by its growing power of administration and surveillance, the development of large scale to standing armies based on mass conscription and its increasing significance as an economic action.

And democratic and socialist movements and revolutions become a central part of European political development, but meet increasing opposition from a modernising and authoritarian right. Weber was trying to interpret different standpoints, different viewpoints.

And we have already discussed Weber contributed heavily to the development of substantive sociological theory and to the debate on methodology. Weber's methodological writings are usually characterized as affecting reconciliation between positivist and Neo-Kantian positions. We have already discussed this.



which we can conceptualize sociology: there are multiple interpretations through which we can encapsulate the spirit of sociology.

For Weber, sociology primarily is a science both within the frameworks of positivism as well as Neo-Kantianism, which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action. Then this sociology is a science can be captured through the frameworks of not only positivism, but also Neo-Kantianism, that attempts the interpretative understanding of social action. You see, positivism does not look at interpretative understanding of social actions: for positivists science is that exact knowledge and exact knowledge is objective, knowledge is neutral, knowledge is value neutral, knowledge is based on facts. But for Neo Kantians, our knowledge of the social world is constructive knowledge, which involves selection and interpretation of multiple data systems.

Now, such kind of delineation of science, such kind of delineation of forms of knowledge, which Neo Kantians try to propound for, encapsulates the spirit of interpretative understanding of social actions. Positivists do not look at interpretation, only Neo-Kantians look at interpretation.

Why do they look at interpretation, and positivists do not look at interpretation? Precisely because of the nature of science, that positivists tried to argue: that the nature of science is exact, is objective, is value neutral, that there is only one single method, common to all sciences irrespective of their subject matter, methodological monism.

Neo Kantians, and particularly Weber they tried to propose two methods. A positivist look at methodological monism as the hallmark of scientific knowledge; For Weber, methodological monism that single method common to all sciences irrespective of their subject matter cannot be the hallmark of science. For Weber, science must be looked at in its totality, natural sciences as well as cultural sciences or social sciences: for science which is based on nature there may be a single method, but for science which is based on our society, based on our culture, based on our economy, based on our quality and so on, Weber propounded methodological dualism or there must be two methods.

Not only what methodological monism suggests that theories must provide explanation, Methodological dualism suggests that it must provide a sense of understanding. If natural sciences follow a single method to explain the variations in two or more phenomenon, two or



more variables, then methodological dualism suggests that there must there may be a method of explanation, but there also must be a method of understanding.

In this sense, it is very important to understand causal explanation in Weberian framework. When I say causal explanation of its course and effects, I mean causes and effects, antecedent and consequent, explicanda and explicandum, that such interpretative understanding of social action must aim at arriving at a causal explanation. Then such kind of interpretative sociology is extremely important to encapsulate or to include sociology as a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action.

Because our action is not absolutely exact: our action varies depending on context, depending on situations, depending on our positionality, depending on our belief patterns, depending on our attitudes and so on. Our action cannot be absolutely exact. Given the same kind of situation, given the same kind of context, given the same kind of circumstances, our actions vary; the way I act to a particular situation you may act in a different way and that involves selection and interpretation.

And for that to happen, we must understand such interpretation in order to arrive at a causal explanation. In this sense, Weber try to define sociology as a science which attempts at the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course as well as effects.

**Interpretative sociology**

Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a *science* which attempts the *interpretative understanding of social action* in order thereby to arrive at a *causal explanation* of its course and effects.

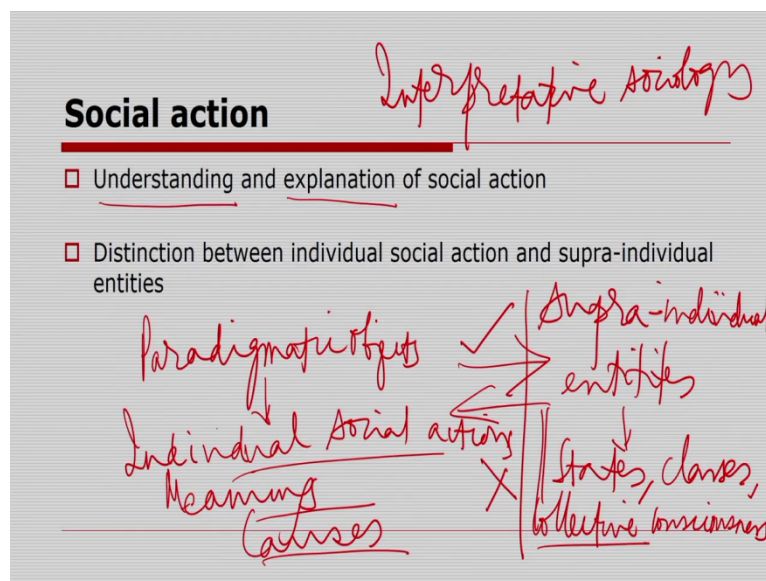
Causes Effects

Causal explanation consists of two parts; one is the cause and the other is the effect. I mean, in causal relationship, in methodological sense and even in layman's language, we suggest

that it is a cause and effect relationship. In this sense, Weber used the term interpretative sociology.

Then till this point, what we have discussed? Weber's famous definition of interpretative sociology encapsulates most of these points, namely, how sociology has been defined, how sociology has been captured in the Weberian framework in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby, to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and its effects.

An exposition of Weber's methodological position can usefully proceed with an analysis of each of the concepts and contrasts involved in the definition that is why I gave you these examples of positivism, Neo-Kantianism, how positivists tried to look at explanation as the hallmark of science, whereas. Neo Kantians including Weber, they try to look at understanding as the hallmark of cultural sciences. That is how Weber tried to classify sciences into two parts; natural sciences as well as cultural sciences or social sciences. Let us see one by one, how it happens.



First, the concept of social action, that is characterization of sociology in terms of understanding and explanation of social action, that involves two important contrasts, understanding and explanation. Then, Weber tries to map out the contours of understanding as well as explanation.

First, Weber distinguishes the paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge. What he meant by paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge: individual social action, the kind of meanings which are attached with individual social actions, why certain individual social

actions occur, why in certain cases individual social actions occur in a different way, that is why for Weber are the paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge. For Weber, paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge refer to individual social actions, meanings and causes.

Weber makes a distinction between paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge: on the one hand, all individual social action, meanings associated with individual social actions and causes of individual social actions and so on, and on the other hand, Supra individual entities. What are these Supra individual entities: they may refer to states, they may refer to classes, they may refer to collective consciousness and so on.

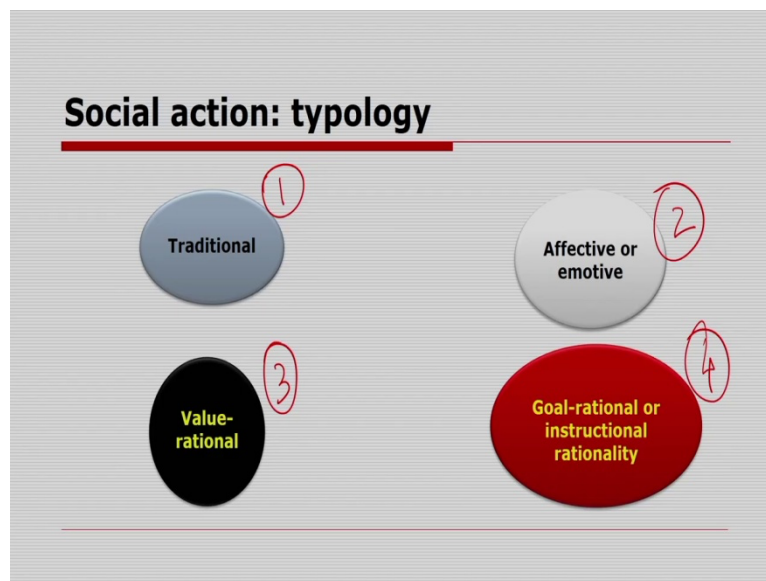
For example, according to Durkheim, these individual actions and so on, they were not very important. For Durkheim, collective solidarity was very important, collective social action was very important, collective consciousness was very important. But on the contrary for Weber, what is this collective consciousness, what is the state, what is this institution, what is the meaning of class and so on; they are nothing but Supra individual social entities. When you say these are supra individual social entities and for Weber, what is important, what are the paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge? Now, for Weber, they are individual social actions and meanings and meanings associated with individual social actions, the causes of individual social actions and so on.

And Weber always tried to make a distinction between these two individual social action on the one hand, and collective social entities on the other. Such distinction that Weber tries to make whose existence is supposed in much sociological theorizing, and also our day to day thinking about social relations.

Weber, for example, does not deny the existence of states, classes, collective consciousness, or supra individual social entities, he does not deny the existence of such entities. Nevertheless, Weber argues that for interpretative sociology, these Supra individual social entities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons. For Weber, all these individual social actions meanings associated with individual social actions and causes of individual social actions, they lead to Supra individual social entities, not the other way around. Supra individual social entities do not lead to individual social actions for Weber. Rather, individual social actions meanings associated with individual social actions, antecedents of individual social actions, they lead to

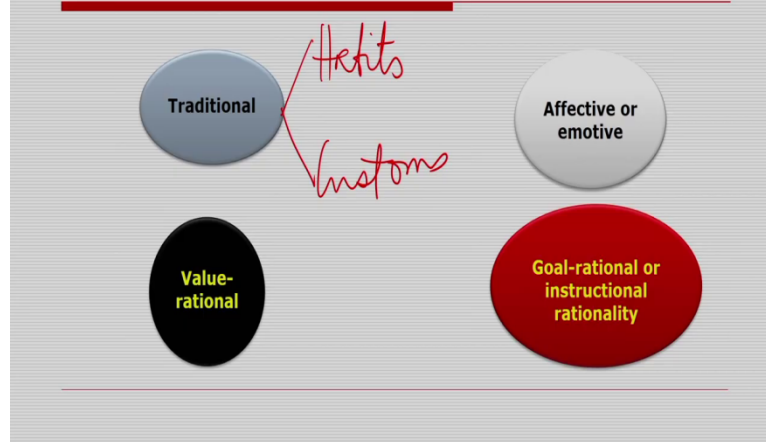
supra individual social entities, namely states, classes, collective consciousness and so, in the Weberian framework.

Weber's position here would be now regarded as methodological individualist, involving the claim that insofar as collectivities may be set to have characteristics, independent of the individuals, which make them up, those characteristics are to be explained in terms of individual actors and their actions. In this context, before getting into methodological individualism in the next class, the next lecture, let us first discuss now, what kind of social action Weber was trying to refer to.



For Weber, there are four types of social actions; 1 traditional social action, 2 affective or emotive social action, 3 value rational social action, and 4 goal rational social action, which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality. Now, what do we mean by traditional social action?

## Social action: typology



Traditional social action refers to the meanings of action, which are related simply to habits and, and are described by Weber as coming close to having no meaning because unreflective in nature. Traditional social action for Weber is based on habits and customs. What is a habit?

A habit is something which an individual has been doing it for a long time usually; a habit is something that an individual gets accustomed to. People generally do not question habits; customs generally are not questioned. In this sense, they are considered traditional social actions. A habit may be individual centric, but a custom is a collective centric.

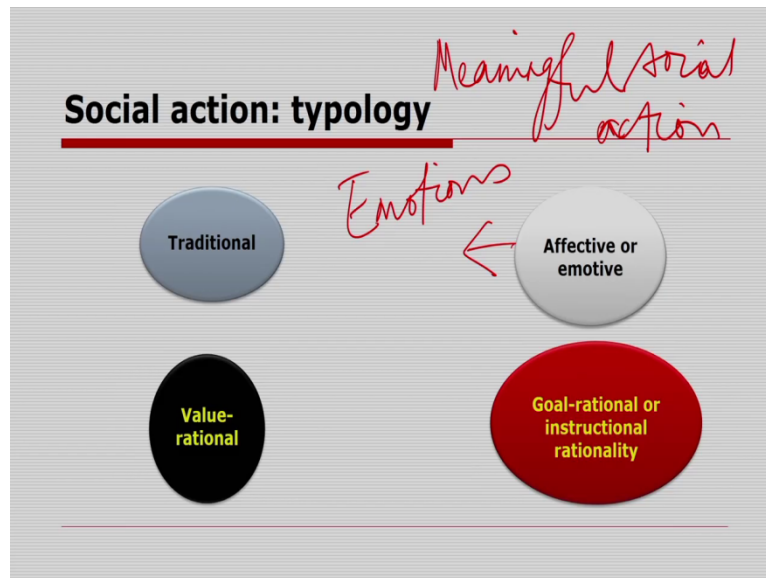
Let me give you an example: for a long time Sati in Indian context, bride would be burnt alive along with the dead groom and that was a part of the customary practice in Indian society which is unethical which is illegal, which is absolutely superstitious.

Why superstitious because Indian socio cultural milieu at that time believed that they both the bride and the groom they can go to heaven without any staircase. But this was also part of our socio cultural milieu which was not questioned for centuries.

Dowry system in India has not been questioned for a long period of time; it is only in the academic circle that we tend to question them, but at the grassroots level, these are not very often questioned. Who should perform certain rituals in some religious event? Only the Brahmins must perform certain rituals, they are not questioned, they are not interrogated.

In this sense, traditional social action becomes unreflective in nature and it hence meaningless, it does not imply that it does not it has no meaning, or meanings are not attached to it, meanings are not associated with but it becomes meaningless: it does not lead

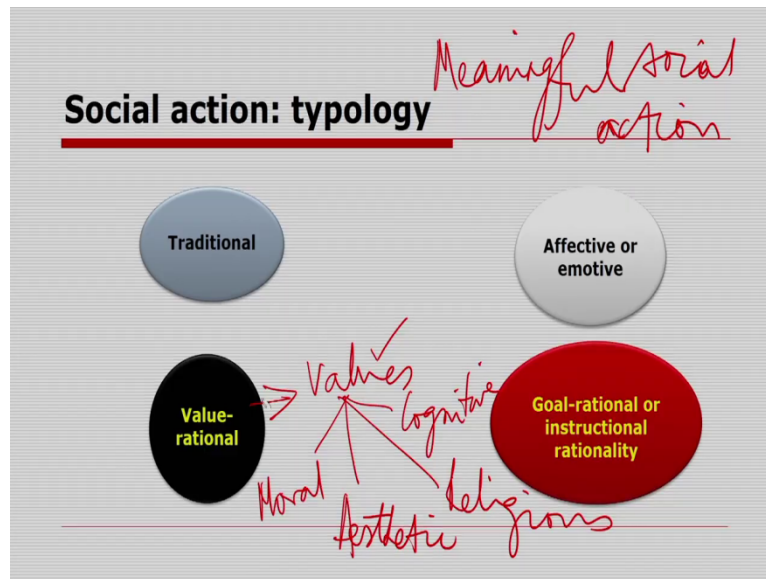
to meaningful social action. In this sense, habits and customs which constitute traditional social action are described by Max Weber as coming close to having no meaning because unreflective in nature.



Affective or emotive social action according to Weber relates to emotions. There are meanings that are attached to emotions. But the individual social action which has been carried out through emotion is unreflective in nature and hence meaningless for Weber.

Affective or emotive social action according to Weber relates to the emotions and is equally seen as often meaningless in these terms because at times a social action carried out by emotion does not lead us anywhere, it becomes baseless, it becomes independent of any kind of reason: at times emotive social action is carried out beyond reason. There is no element of rationality found in the case of affective or emotive social actions.

Then the major distinction of clearly meaningful social action then is between the last two categories namely value rational social action and goal rational social action, alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

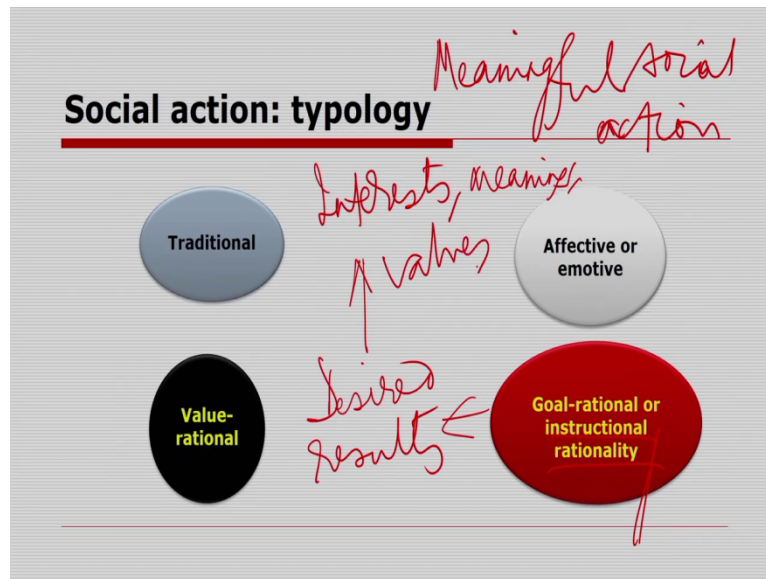


Then what is value rational social action? Value rational social action treats action as having a value in itself which is based on values which is independent from its effect and derives for example from moral values, may be aesthetic values, may be religious values, the values may be cognitive value.

That is why according to Weber, value rational social action treats actions having a value in itself which is independent from its effect. It may not have a, have an immediate utilitarian value, immediate goal, immediate objective, immediate result, but it must be grounded, on certain value systems.

Speak the truth always, honesty is the best policy, these are value systems. It may not have immediate result but they are moral values; aesthetic values are involved in this, religious values are involved in this, cognitive values are involved in this.

That is why according to Weber, value rational social action treats action as having a value in itself. Values for sociologists are higher-order norms, values for sociologists are objects of study. Value rational social action hence according to Weber treats action as having a value in itself, which is independent from its effect or result and derives for example, from moral value or aesthetic value or religious value or cognitive value and so on.



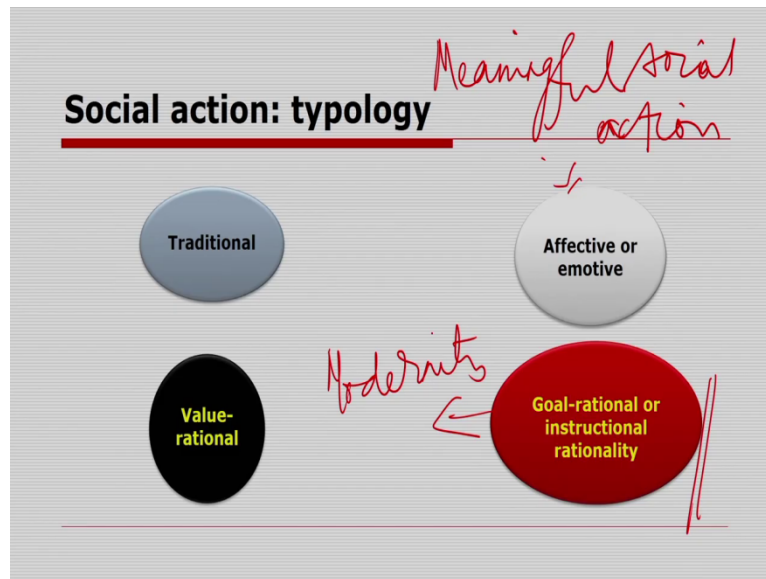
Goal rational social action which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality is oriented purely towards desired results, goal, aim, objective. When Weber was trying to refer to goal rational social action, which is purely oriented towards desired results or a more objective or goal.

I mean these last categories are particularly associated with Weber's account of modernity, because modernity as an ideology is always or has always aimed towards certain desired results, which Weber sees as a progressive extension of this principle of instrumental rationality.

And this goal rational social action or instrumental rationality which sees action, which witnesses action as deriving its whole meaning and interest from its results. These desired results will create interests, meanings, values and so on. As value rational social action suggests that these values are independent of results, but goal rational social action or instrumental rationality suggests that having desired results as an aim, as an objective, as a goal, they lead towards the shaping of or they tried to justify the narratives of interests, meanings and values. And hence, according to Weber, goal rational social action or instrumental rationality is oriented purely towards desired results.

And this last category is particularly associated with Weber's account of modernity, which Weber sees as a progressive extension of this principle of instrumental rationality; that instrumental rationality sees action as deriving its sole meaning and interest from its results to dominate all contemporary society, by breaking away from traditional, feudal, agriculture hangovers.





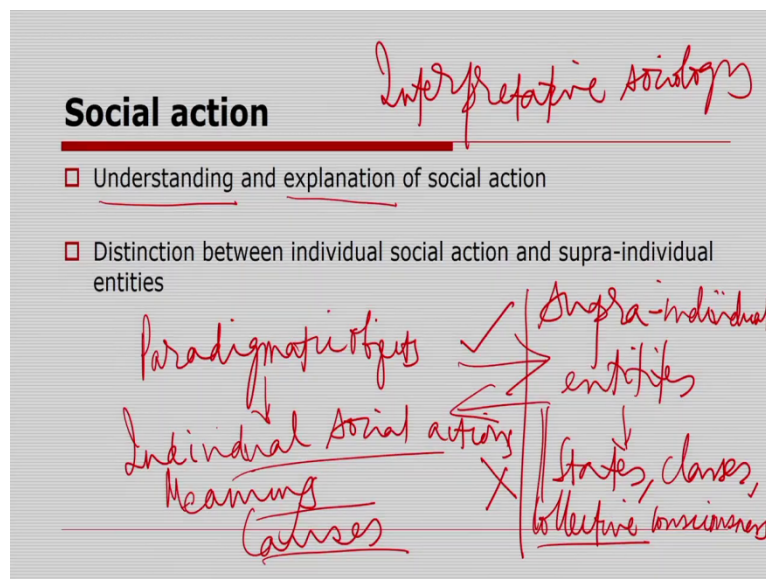
In this sense, goal rational social action or instrumental rationality is a marker of modernity. For Weber, the history of modernity is the history of the progressive orientation of all social action in all social contexts to instrumental rationality. And this rationalization of social life involves an ever greater development of technical means, and a progressive orientation to the ends towards which these means are supposed to lead.

And in this sense, in the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, Weber argues that Calvinist and dissenting religion represented a rationalization of human behaviour, which focused people's constant attention on the relationship between their everyday activity on the one hand, and their hope of salvation on the other.

And all behaviour was scrutinized to see whether or not it represented a waste of time or thus possibly an indication that one was not destined for salvation. And this obsession with making the most of each minute with the rationalization of everyday life, particularly economic life gradually came to take complete precedence over the intended goal. Intended goal, goal with an intention of demonstrating to oneself that one was likely to be destined for salvation. And in this sense, Weber's analysis of the development of bureaucracy is similar and bureaucracy for Weber is simply the most technically efficient means of organizing the action of the state. The bureaucratic means of organization come to predominate in modern societies irrespective of the actual goals which they are supposed to solve. Increasingly bureaucracy according to Weber takes on a life and logic of its own that renders its ultimate goal irrelevant. In Weber's terminology, formal rationality, the instrumental rationality of a particular form leads to substantive rationality, a content, which is in fact derived from the form and not from the goal, that the formal rationality is supposed to serve.

Capitalism according to Weber is a very important instance of this general rationalization of behaviour that characterizes modern society. Weber defines capitalism in terms of the rationalization in the pursuit of profit, or rationalization, which ultimately implies that the individuals to whom this profit is accruing, are not in a position to enjoy its possession, but must rationalize their own lives, replacing an aristocratic lifestyle based effectively on the service of profit rather than its enjoyment.

Once again, the means becomes the end and Weber's account of such typology of social action and that goal oriented or social action or instrumental rationality, as an account of modernity, as the progressive extension of rationalization, and his scepticism about the possibility of reversing this trend, makes his view of modernity, an important contribution to substantive sociological theory and the debate on methodology.



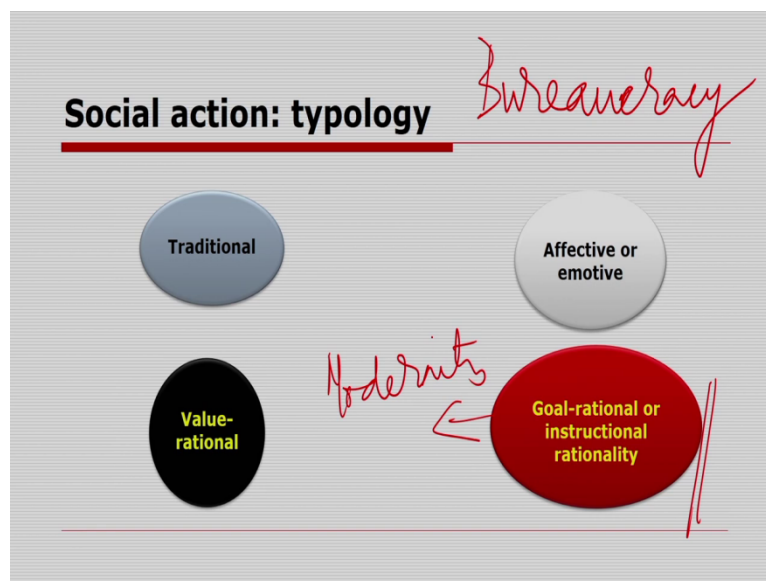
Then, what have we discussed in this lecture? We have discussed the second part of Max Weber. Today is the eighth lecture of this course, we have discussed Weberian reflections on interpretative sociology, how sociology is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects.

We have also discussed social action, how an exposition of Weber's methodological position can usefully proceed with an analysis of each of the concepts and contrasts involved in the definition. And first the concept of social action, the characterization of sociology in terms of the understanding and explanation of social action involves two important contrasts.

First, Weber distinguishes the paradigmatic objects of sociological knowledge for him, individual social actions, meanings and causes, from the Supra individual social entities namely states, classes, collective consciousnesses and so on, or whatever whose existence is supposed in much sociological theorizing and also everyday thinking about social relations.

Weber does not actually deny the existence of such entities, but argues that for interpretative sociology, these Supra individuals, social entities namely states, classes, collective consciousnesses and so on must be treated as a solely the resultant and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons.

And Weber's position here would be now regarded as methodological individualist involving the claim that in so far as the collectivities may be set to have characteristics independent of the individuals which make them up, those characteristics are to be explained in terms of individual actors and their actions.



And then we have discussed the typology of social action: there are four types of social action, traditional social action, affective or emotive social action, value rational social action and goal rational social action, which is alternatively known as instrumental rationality.

And for Max Weber, value rational social action and goal rational social action or instrumental rationality, they constitute the core of meaningful social action. And goal rational social action or instrumental rationality, how it is a project of modernist construal: it contributes to critical modernist paradigm in sociology. And in the next lecture, i.e. in the ninth lecture, what we are going to discuss?

## Methodological individualism

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- Theoretical positions holding that adequate sociological accounts necessarily involve reference to persons, their interpretations of their circumstances, and the reasons and motives for the actions they take. Weber is of the opinion that such action by no means necessarily follows from the sharing of a common class-situation.
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We are going to discuss Weber's methodological individualism, interpretative understanding of social acts and how interpretative understanding of social action has two parts, namely, the textual interpretation of the textual and linguistic meaning of a cultural product and value relevance, how it involves selective conceptualization of the object in relation to some value, maybe social value, maybe aesthetic value, maybe cognitive value, and so on.

And how, for Weber selection is based on cultural relevance, and how value for a sociologist is always an object of study. And how Weber divides interpretative understanding into two parts namely direct understanding or observational understanding on the one hand and indirect understanding or explanatory understanding of social action on the other, and how Weber tries to look at culture and so on. Thank you.