**Social Action**

**A. Background**

The major approaches to sociology that emerged out of the Enlightenment, and continuing through the early twentieth century tend to be structural in nature, emphasizing the influence of society and its structures on the position, activities, and actions of individuals and groups. Sometimes these approaches ignore the individual entirely, and discuss only the structures that develop in society, and the relationship among these. These approaches are macro analyses, dealing with "impersonal and large-scale phenomena." (Layder, p. 6). Marxian analysis is largely macrosociological and structural, and emphasizes social class, means and modes of production, division of labour, class conflict, and crises. Similarly, Durkheim dealt with societal level structures or concepts such as status groups, the division of labour, social facts, norms, and social solidarity. While these structures at the macrosociological level explain a large part of what occurs in society, and what happens to people in any society, actual people and their social interaction do not form an important part of the sociological analysis

**B. Weber on Social Action (Hadden, pp. 133-136)**

**1. Overview**

Large parts of Weber’s writings concern structures (capitalism, authority, religion, history) and many of the concepts he develops (rationalization, bureaucracy, domination) are structural and concern society as a whole. At the same time, he emphasizes the importance of the individual, his or her actions, and the social interaction among individuals and groups. Weber argues that the task of the sociologist is "to understand the actions of individual members therein" (Hadden, p. 133). This has two aspects to it. First, as people encounter others, their actions will be oriented to others. For the individual, there must be some reason for the action he or she takes, and Weber attempts to understand the meaning associated with each social action. Second, when sociologists refer to social structures, these are features of society that result from the actions of individuals in the society. Social action over time and space is not random or completely unique in each interaction between individuals. Rather, such interaction tends to have certain patterns or regularities associated with it, so that meaningful action among different individuals is associated with expected responses from others. These patterns are meaningful actions of individuals, but they may ultimately solidify into customs, laws, institutions, or structures.

Hadden notes that Weber’s "preference is for an account which begins and ends by considering people as they engage in daily activities within … orders and structures" (p. 133). This requires the sociologist to develop an understanding of individuals and the meaning that people associate with objects, symbols, and the actions of other individuals and groups. In order to do this, Weber argued that it is necessary to examine "people’s subjective motivations if we are to understand the action of individuals" (Hadden, p. 133). Each social action has meaning associated with it, in the sense that the individual does not act as an automaton or robot, or on the basis of instinct or stimulae, or as a conditioned reflex. Rather, a large part of what individuals do is to consider the situation they are part of, think about how to approach the situation, consider the possible action of others and attempt to meet the ends that the individual has for this situation. This may not always be a consciously worked out process, but for Weber the task of the sociologist is to attempt to understand the motivating factors, see how people interpret the relationship, and how they attribute meaning to the situation.

Weber’s approach is important to sociology for three reasons. First, his approach defines limits for the sociologist, in that the social is that which has meaning for individuals. Individual behaviour or activities that lack meaning for the individual are not the proper subject of sociology. Behaviour which is habitual or is a conditioned reflex is not of concern to the sociologist. Similarly, Weber considers social actions to be only those that are oriented to others and the behaviour of others. Solitary prayer or economic activity that does not consider actions of others is not social action.

Second, this approach allows sociology to distinguish social action from behaviour in the psychological sense. Weber was not interested in behaviour that resulted from a stimulus, more or less automatically. Rather, "he was concerned with action that clearly involved the intervention of thought processes between the occurrence of a stimulus and the ultimate response" (Ritzer, p. 121). While behaviour in the psychological sense is an important part of overall human activity, Weber’s approach allows sociology to be distinguished from psychology.

Third, Weber considers action to be rational, in that "mental acts shape or direct enacted conduct" (Cohen, p. 121). As with much of nineteenth century social science, especially economics, Weber privileges consciousness and reason. In this approach, humans are rational and conscious, interpreting the world around them, so that the action taken by the individual is a result of these processes. As a result, Weber excludes much human behaviour as nonrational or irrational – impulsive acts, unconscious motivations, emotions such as anger, pride, jealousy, and love (see Cohen, p. 121 and Weber, p. 6).

While there are limitations to Weber’s approach, in that many forms of human behaviour are excluded from his sociological analysis, by concentrating on the meaning, interpretation, rationality, Weber directed sociologists to a study of social action. Later theorists of social action build on Weber’s approach, although their analyses may consider a wider range of human behaviour than what Weber considered appropriate.

**2. Three Aspects of Social Action**

Cohen (pp. 113-115) notes that there are three aspects to Weber’s approach to social action contained in Chapter I of *Economy and Society*. These are as follows.

**a. Subjective Meaning**. Weber notes how the sociologist must consider the meaning an individual attaches to an action. Only when the individual’s behaviour is oriented toward some end and prompted by consideration of the actions of others is it social.

We shall speak of "action" insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is "social" insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course. (Weber, p. 4).

All aspects of the social world must be considered from the actor’s point of view. Inanimate objects, birth and death, and the environment may be considered constants and nothing more than elements of a material world, but for Weber these are interpreted differently at various times and places. Hadden’s example of the multiple uses of an ax is an example of this (p. 133). For Weber, a sociologist must conceive them "with reference to how actors understand their practical application or symbolic significance" (Cohen, p. 113). Similarly, the actor orients actions toward a wide range of other people, some very familiar, but others that the individual might not know, or others that are groups or collectivities.

**b. Social Relationship**. A second aspect is that social action makes little sense unless the nature of social relationships is considered. Weber notes:

The term "social relationship" will be used to denote the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. The social relationship thus consists entirely and exclusively in the existence of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action – irrespective, for the time being, of the basis of this probability. (Weber, pp. 26-27).

Here the action is meaningful from the viewpoint of the individual, but also takes account of the actions of others. While different actors may not interpret the action in the same manner, at least there is some interpretation on each side. The result could be disagreement or agreement, depending on the mutual interpretations.

**c. Stable Content**. The third part of social action is that social relationships are ordinarily stable. If each social action met completely unexpected results, maintenance of social relationships over any period of time would be difficult. Some social relationships are very short term, but others have considerable permanence. Weber notes:

In the latter case there is a probability of the repeated recurrence of the behavior which corresponds to its subjective meaning and hence is expected. … The meaningful content which remains relatively constant in a social relationship is capable of formulation in terms of maxims which the parties concerned expect to be adhered to by their partners on the average and approximately. The more rational in relation to values or to given ends the action is, the more likely this is to be the case. (Weber, p. 28).

That is, social action considers the response of others, and others generally respond in the general way that is expected. So long as actions and responses fall into these expected and usual patterns, this makes it possible for ordinary social relationships to continue. Further, these continued patterns make it possible for larger scale institutions to develop. If the expectations continue sufficiently long, these expectations become maxims, or what sociologists have termed norms and rules. These could also be patterns such as religious commandments, bureaucratic codes, or norms of profitability in a corporation (Cohen, p. 115).

On pages 134 and 135, Hadden summarizes these considerations by discussing some historical and contemporary examples of organizations, institutions, and communities (guilds, universities). Actions in these contexts "require coordination, in other words, everyone, in order to achieve his/her goal, must have a pretty good idea of everyone else’s" (p. 135). *Verstehen*, understanding, or intepretation means that the sociologist

understands "what the actions of each participant mean to the others, and how this affects their course of action" (p. 135).

While Weber did not complete the description of society on this basis, in *Economy and Society* he attempted to show how the organizations and institutions of society could be explained by the actions of individuals.

**3. Ideal Types of Social Action**

Weber notes that social action can be oriented in various ways at different times and places. The various forms of social action each have meaning for individuals but constitute conceptually distinct types of social action with different consequences for the individual and society. Hadden (p. 135) notes how Weber distinguishes four types of social action (Weber, pp. 24-25). These are ideal types in that Weber focusses on the unique features of each form of social action, abstracting the essential aspects of action that typify each ideal type. No actual action in the social world is likely to be entirely of one ideal type, but combines features of one of the four ideal types. Hadden notes that ideal types are useful in exmaining how actual actions deviate from the ideal type, allowing the analyst to determine what aspect of meaning produces deviation from the ideal type (Hadden, p. 135).

**i. Instrumentally Rational or Purposive-Rational**. Economic activity as characterized in many economic models is an example of this type. In this form of action, an individual has various alternative commodities which can be purchased, and the individual considers how to choose among these to achieve maximum satisfaction. That is, purposive-rational action is "the selection of the most effective means for the achievement of an immediately practical goal or end" (Hadden, p. 135). This form of action has likely become more common in western society, but even many actual economically oriented actions are not purely instrumental.

**ii. Value-Rational**. These are actions "attempting to maximize an absolute value, such as one might find in cultures with religious commandments for daily conduct" (Hadden, p. 135). In this case, the actor is rational in the sense of using effective means to achieve a given end. The individual has a commitment to a certain end, and this could be any end. Weber considers this to be "determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success" (Weber, pp. 24-5). The key is that social action is rational in that the individual attempts to find the most effective way of pursuing this end.

**iii. Emotional or Affectual**. This is a form of social action which is "determined by the actor’s specific affects and feeling states" (Weber, p. 25). It combines ends and means and can be impulsive and emotional. While some emotional behaviour is not considered social in that it is entirely impulsive, Weber considers this social action in that the behaviour does have meaning, but the most effective method of achieving the end may not be carefully considered. Social action of this type is not ordinarily considered to be rational in any normal sense of the term. See Ashley, p. 276

**iv. Traditional or Habitual** is "determined by ingrained habituation" (Weber, p. 25).

In this case, custom, tradition, or habit is the source of social action. Again, some forms of this type of behaviour would not necessarily be considered social, but to the extent that these customs and traditions are meaningful, Weber considers these social. This form of action is important for Weber in that this can become the basis for authority and legitimacy. To the extent that people feel a duty to abide by customs or traditions, social order is created and maintained, and this acquires a legitimacy in the minds of those who accept the traditions.

**4. Implications and Conclusions**

Weber’s aim was to systematically examine meaning associated with individual behaviour. By identifying several ideal types, Weber thought it possible for sociology to understand social action in the contemporary world and in historical situations.

Weber’s discussion of social action was primarily aimed at understanding individual action. While groups are mentioned, this was not Weber’s primary focus. Rather, he considered the action of collectivities to be an amalgam of individual actions, developing into particular patterns that constitute the institutions, organizations, structures, and norms of society.

In his discussion of social action, Weber makes little mention of conflict. There may not always be common understandings in social relationships, and this may create difficulties for those in the relationship. But unlike Marx, Weber does not consider conflict and contradiction to be the essential aspects of social relationships in modern society. At the same time, Weber does not gloss over disagreements and misunderstandings, and considers power to be an important feature of his analysis.

Another feature of Weber’s analysis is to note how the actions of individuals must be analyzed to determine their consequences, since there may be unintended consequences to individual or group social action, or of the combined effects of each of these actions. Outcomes of social actions cannot be predicted from the meanings of that action for individuals. For Weber, attempting to understand individual and group action and some of their results is necessary to provide an explanation of how society works and how social change takes place.

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