

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Michaelmas 2025

Dr Michael Biggs

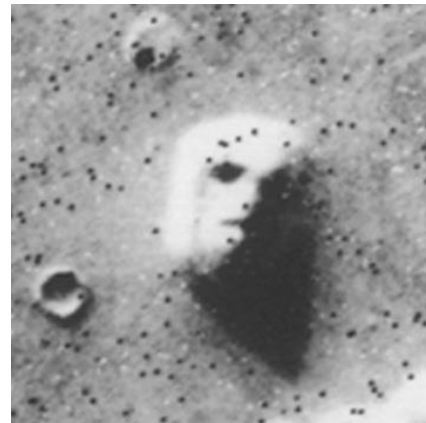
Theoretical Perspectives

3. Values and meaning

[http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/
SociologicalTheory.shtml](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/SociologicalTheory.shtml)

Meaning, not mere beliefs

- Humans compulsively make meaning—infants vs linguistically trained apes
- Not reducible to rational belief-formation (RCT)
 - most beliefs are inherited from culture
 - beliefs do more than describe objective reality
 - objective/subjective is a cultural artifact!
 - e.g. Paracelsus 16C: treat syphilis with mercury — mercury is sign of planet Mercury — Mercury is sign of the market — market where prostitutes gather (Hacking 1983)
- We are primed to detect intentionality ([lecture 1](#)) (Guthrie 1993): gods/God
- Beliefs about the “meaning” of the cosmos/life
 - death as ‘fundamental anxiety’ (Schütz 1945)
 - ‘conception of the world as a meaningful totality, ... based on the religious postulate’ (Weber 1920)



Values, not mere desires

- Desires must be evaluated/interpreted
 - ‘Motivations or desires do not only count in virtue of the attraction of their consummations but also in virtue of the kind of life and kind of subject that these desires properly belong to’ (Taylor 1977)
- Emotions are constituted by the interpretation of feeling; we are ‘self-interpreting animals’ (Taylor 1985)
 - e.g. sexual jealousy => righteous anger or hang-up?
- Values transcend individual utility/pleasure, and thus transcend mortality
 - religious
 - nationalism
 - art / science



=> sociology is about interpretation, not explanation

‘social interaction can more profitably be compared to the exchange of ideas in a conversation than to the interaction of forces in a physical system’ (Winch 1958)

=> attempt to reconcile the two positions, ‘the interpretive understanding of social action, and thereby ... causal explanation’ (Weber 1920)

Weber’s types of action:

1. habitual
2. affectual
3. instrumentally rational (*Zweckrationalität*)
4. value-rational ...

Weber's (1920) value-rationality

‘the actions of persons who, regardless of cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honour, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some “cause” ...

value-rational action always involves “commands” or “demands” which, in the actor’s opinion, are binding on him’

‘Here I stand, I can do no
other’

—Martin Luther, 1520



Reducible to self-interest?

Why did Hobbes give to a beggar?

- ‘I was in pain to consider the miserable condition of the old man, and now my alms, giving him some relief, does also ease me’

Model guilt as psychic cost:

- Rational individual would steal book worth x if
 - $x > \text{probability of detection } p \times \text{fine } f$
 - e.g. p is 10%, f is £200, then $x > £20$
- Add guilt as psychic cost: steal if
 - $x > p \times f + \text{guilt } g$
 - e.g. g is £1000, then steal if $x > £1020$

Problem:

- you would welcome someone paying the penalty fine—*but you would not take a guilt-eliminating pill* (Elster 2000)!

Cultural differences

- *Different* values motivate action in different cultures—*even* in different spheres of life
 - ‘very frequently the world-views that have been created by ideas have, like signalmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest’ (Weber 1915)
- Values may be *irreconcilable*—unlike interests that can be bargained (at least not in the same way: Ginges et al. 2007)
- Action motivated by values is hard for outsiders to understand
 - ‘the more the value to which action is oriented is elevated to the status of an absolute value, the more “irrational” ... the corresponding action’ (Weber 1920)
 - e.g. suicide terrorism, honour killing



Style of explanation (Weber 1904/5)

- ‘Spirit’ of capitalism is *unnatural*
 - ‘the desire of bettering our condition comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go to the grave ... An augmentation of fortune is the means by which the greater part of mankind propose and wish to better their condition.’ (Smith 1776—[lecture 1](#))
- What is natural: greed, hedonism; satisfaction of customary wants





- Vocation (Luther): monastic asceticism => this-worldly asceticism
- Predestination (Calvin): *God has determined from eternity whom he will save and whom he will damn, regardless of their faith, love, or merit*
 - eliminates ‘magic’ as means to salvation; no intermediary
- Consequence: systematic life-conduct
 - not fatalism!
 - psychological effect: ascetic action in the world, looking for signs (not causes) that one is among the elect
- Everyone forced to be religious ‘virtuosos’

‘[t]he religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of ... the spirit of capitalism’

- capitalism (instrumental-rationality, self-interest) was created by religion (value-rationality)
 - once institutionalized, religious scaffolding can disappear

Why did the doctrine have such appeal?

- Weber: one consistent solution to problem of theodicy
 - ‘the rationality, in the sense of logical and teleological “consistency”, of an intellectual-theoretical or practical-ethical attitude has and always has had power over man’ (Weber 1915)
- accentuates existential anxiety, then provides solution

Problems

- We need also to *explain* values (equivalent to opportunities for RCT)
 - Weber's rationalization and disenchantment (see also Taylor 1989)
 - functionalist (lecture 8)? e.g. absence of state => code of honour
- Danger of tautology—unlike opportunities
 - evidence for values is either action or proclamation ...
 - ethical experiment: stated values uncorrelated with behaviour (Hugh-Jones 2016)

- How important is intellectual consistency?
 - underestimates emotion and ritual
 - nationalism!



Summary

- Individual constructs a meaningful world, evaluates desires, and (sometimes) is willing to violate self-interest
 - even if only a few people are willing to make real sacrifices for values, they can change the course of history

Virtues

- meaning and evaluation are central to human activity
- beliefs/desires are incorporated within encompassing frameworks
- cultural variation/change

Questions

- Discuss the plausibility of Weber's explanatory mechanism in accounting for the influence of religious beliefs on economic value.
- Compare the roles of religious/cultural beliefs and impersonal market forces in Weber's theory of capitalism's origins and development.
- 'Because social action cannot be divorced from cultural meaning, interpretation must take precedence over explanation in sociology.' Discuss.
- 'Self-interest is not a basic human motivation; it is a value peculiar to modern Western societies.' Discuss.

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/5)

Max Weber, 'The Economic Ethic of the World Religions' and 'Intermediate Considerations: Theory of Stages and Directions of Religious Rejections of the world' (1915), *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills

Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1920)

Alfred Schütz, 'On Multiple Realities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5 (1945)

Charles Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' and 'Self-Interpreting Animals', *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1: *Human Agency and Language* (1985)

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989)

Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in The Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (1993)

Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* (1983)

Jeremy Ginges et al., 'Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104 (2007)

Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958)

Raymond Boudon, 'Beyond Rational Choice Theory', *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003)

Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (2000)

David Hugh-Jones, 'Honesty, Beliefs about Honesty, and Economic Growth in 15 Countries', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 127 (2016)