
UNIT 16 POWER AND AUTHORITY

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to

- understand the concepts of power and authority as explained by Max Weber
- show the connections between Weber's types of social action and types of authority
- describe in detail the three types of authority namely, traditional, charismatic and rational-legal
- describe bureaucracy as the instrument for the operation of rational-legal authority.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In units 14 and 15 of this block you read about Weber's views on the **ideal type** and the link between religion and economy. In this unit, you will find some of Weber's important contributions in understanding **power** and **authority**. In the first section (16.2), there is a brief discussion of the

sociological concepts of power and authority with special reference to Weber's understanding of the terms. The second section (16.3) will mention the types of social action that Weber identifies and the types of authority that flow from them, namely, traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority. The third section (16.4) will focus on the instrument through which rational-legal authority is exercised, namely, bureaucracy.

16.2 POWER AND AUTHORITY

Let us now examine the key concepts of power and authority, both, in the general sociological sense as well as in the specific Weberian context.

16.2.0 Power

In ordinary usage, the term 'power' means strength or the capacity to control. Sociologists describe it as the ability of an individual or group to fulfil its desires and implement its decisions and ideas. It involves the ability to influence and/ or control the behaviour of others even against their will.

For Max Weber, power is an aspect of social relationships. It refers to the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behaviour of another person. Power is present in social interaction and creates situations of inequality since the one who has power imposes it on others. The impact of power varies from situation to situation. On the one hand, it depends on the capacity of the powerful individual to exercise power. On the other hand it depends upon the extent to which it is opposed or resisted by the others. Weber says that power can be exercised in all walks of life.

It is not restricted to a battlefield or to politics. It is to be observed in the market place, on a lecture platform, at a social gathering, in sports, scientific discussions and even through charity. For example, giving alms or '*daan*' to a beggar is a subtle way of exercising your superior economic power. You can bring a smile of joy to the beggar's face or a feeling of despair by giving or refusing alms.

What are the sources of power? Weber discusses two contrasting sources of power. These are as follows

- a) Power which is derived from a constellation of interests that develop in a formally free market. For example, a group of producers of sugar controls supply of their production in the market to maximise their profit.
- b) An established system of authority that allocates the right to command and the duty to obey. For example, in the army, a *jawan* is obliged to obey the command of his officer. The officer derives his power through an established system of authority.

As you have seen in the last point, any discussion of power leads us to think about its legitimacy. It is legitimacy, which according to Weber constitutes the core point of authority. Let us now examine the concept of authority.

16.2.1 Authority

The German word “Herrschaft”, used by Weber, has been variously translated. Some sociologists term it as ‘authority’, others as ‘domination’ or ‘command’. Herrschaft is a situation in which a ‘Herr’ or master dominates or commands others. Raymond Aron (1967: 187) defines Herrschaft as the master’s ability to obtain the obedience of those who theoretically owe it to him. In this unit, Weber’s concept of Herrschaft will denote the term “authority”.

A question may be raised, namely, what is the difference between power and authority? Power, as you have seen, refers to the ability or capacity to control another. Authority refers to legitimised power. It means that the master has the right to command and can expect to be obeyed.

Let us now see the elements that constitute authority.

16.2.3 Elements of Authority

For a system of authority to exist the following elements must be present.

- i) An individual ruler/master or a group of rulers/masters.
- ii) An individual/group that is ruled.
- iii) The will of the ruler to influence the conduct of the ruled which may be expressed through commands.
- iv) Evidence of the influence of the rulers in terms of compliance or obedience shown by the ruled.
- v) Direct or indirect evidence which shows that the ruled have internalised and accepted the fact that the ruler’s commands must be obeyed.

We see that authority implies a reciprocal relationship between the rulers and the ruled. The rulers believe that they have the legitimate right to exercise their authority. On the other hand, the ruled accept this power and comply with it, reinforcing its legitimacy.

It is time to complete Activity 1 and Check Your Progress 1.

Activity 1
 Give example of at least five authority from your daily life. What are the elements involved in them? Prepare a note of one page on them. Exchange your note, if possible, with the co-learners at your Study Centre.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) In one line define the concept of power.

- ii) Describe, in about three lines, two important sources of power.

iii) Point out, in three lines three important elements of authority.

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Let us now examine the types of authority identified by Weber. Before we do so, it is very important to study his typology of social action. The types of authority Weber discusses are, as you will soon see, closely linked with the types of social action.

16.3 TYPES OF SOCIAL ACTION AND TYPES OF AUTHORITY

In sub-section 14.4.1(iii) of unit 14 we discussed the Weberian concept of social action. Max Weber describes sociology as a comprehensive science of social action (Aron, 1967: 187). He presents a typology of social action, which we will now briefly discuss.

16.3.0 Types of Social Action

Weber identifies four distinct types of social action. They are

i) **Zweckrational action or rational action in relation to a goal**

An example of this is an engineer constructing a bridge, who uses certain materials in a certain manner to achieve goal. This activity is directed towards obtaining that goal, namely, completing the construction.

ii) **Wertrational action, or rational action in relation to a value**

Here, one may give the example of a soldier laying down his life for the country. His action is not directed towards attaining specific material goal like wealth. It is for the sake of certain values like honour and patriotism.

iii) **Affective action**

This kind of action results from the emotional state of mind of the actor. If some one is teasing a girl in a bus, she may get so irritated that she may slap the offending person. She has been provoked so much that she has reacted violently.

iv) **Traditional action**

This is an action, which is guided by customs and longstanding beliefs, which become second nature or habit. In traditional Indian society, doing '*pranam*' or '*namaskar*' to elders is almost second nature needing no prompting.

One may find that the above typology of social action is reflected in Weber's classification of types of authority. We will discuss this in the following sub-section (16.3.2).

16.3.1 Types of Authority

As you have already read in sub-section 16.2.1, authority implies legitimacy. According to Weber, there are three systems of legitimation, each with its corresponding norms, which justify the power to command. It is these systems of legitimation which are designated as the following types of authority.

- (i) Traditional authority
- (ii) Charismatic authority
- (iii) Rational-legal authority



Fig. 16.1 Types of Authority

Let us describe each of these types in some detail.

16.3.1.0 Traditional Authority

This system of legitimation flows from traditional action. In other words, it is based on customary law and the sanctity of ancient traditions. It is based on the belief that a certain authority is to be respected because it has existed since time immemorial.

In traditional authority, rulers enjoy personal authority by virtue of their inherited status. Their commands are in accordance with customs and they also possess the right to extract compliance from the ruled. Often, they abuse their power. The persons who obey them are 'subjects' in the fullest sense of the term. They obey their master out of personal loyalty or a pious regard for his time-honoured status. Let us take an example from our own society. You are familiar with the caste system in India. Why did the 'lower' castes bear the atrocities inflicted by the 'upper' castes for centuries? One way of explaining this is because the authority of the 'upper' castes had the backing of tradition and antiquity. The 'lower' castes some say had become socialised into accepting their oppression. Thus, we can see that traditional authority is based on the belief in the sacred quality of

long-standing traditions. This gives legitimacy to those who exercise authority.

Traditional authority does not function through written rules or laws. It is transmitted by inheritance down the generations. Traditional authority is carried out with the help of relatives and personal favourites.

In modern times, the incidence of traditional authority has declined. Monarchy, the classic example of traditional authority still exists, but in a highly diluted form. The Queen of England is a traditional figure of authority but as you may be aware, she does not actually exercise her authority. The laws of the land are enacted in her name, but their content is decided by the legislators, the representatives of the people. The queen has a parliament, which governs the kingdom, but she does not appoint ministers. She is a nominal head of state.

Briefly, traditional authority derives its legitimacy from longstanding traditions, which enable some to command and compel others to obey. It is hereditary authority and does not require written rules. The 'masters' exercise their authority with the help of loyal relatives and friends. Weber considers this kind of authority as irrational. It is therefore rarely found in modern developed societies.

16.3.1.1 Charismatic Authority

Charisma means an extraordinary quality possessed by some individuals (see Box 16.1). This gives such people unique powers to capture the fancy and devotion of ordinary people. Charismatic authority is based on extraordinary devotion to an individual and to the way of life preached by this person. The legitimacy of such authority rests upon the belief in the supernatural or magical powers of the person. The charismatic leader 'proves' his/her power through miracles, military and other victories or the dramatic prosperity of the disciples. As long as charismatic leaders continue to 'prove' their miraculous powers in the eyes of their disciples, their authority stays intact. You may have realised that the type of social action that charismatic authority is related to is affective action. The disciples are in a highly charged emotional state as a result of the teachings and appeal of the charismatic leaders. They worship their hero.

Box 16.1

Charisma

Dictionary meaning of the term charisma is a divinely inspired gift. It is gift of divine grace. This term is used by Weber to denote "a kind of power over others which is also perceived as authority by those subject to it. the holder of charisma may be a human being, in which case his authority might be interpreted in terms of myth of the divine mission, insight or moral attributes" (see Scruton 1982: 58).

Charismatic authority is not dependent on customary beliefs or written rules. It is purely the result of the special qualities of the leader who governs or rules in his personal capacity. Charismatic authority is not organised; therefore there is no paid staff or administrative set-up. The leader and his

assistants do not have a regular occupation and often reject their family responsibilities. These characteristics sometimes make charismatic leaders revolutionaries, as they have rejected all the conventional social obligations and norms.

Based, as it is, on the personal qualities of an individual, the problem of succession arises with the death or disappearance of the leader. The person who succeeds the leader may not have charismatic powers. In order to transmit the original message of the leader, some sort of organisation develops. The original charisma gets transformed either into traditional authority or rational-legal authority. Weber calls this **routinisation** of charisma.

If the charismatic figure is succeeded by a son/daughter or some close relative, traditional authority results. If, on the other hand, charismatic qualities are identified and written down, then it changes into rational legal authority, where anyone acquiring these qualities can become a leader. Charismatic authority can thus be described as unstable and temporary. We can find examples of charismatic leaders throughout history. Saints, prophets and some political leaders are examples of such authority. Kabir, Nanak, Jesus, Mohammed, Lenin and Mahatma Gandhi, to name a few were charismatic leaders. They were revered by people for their personal qualities and the message they preached, not because they represented traditional or rational-legal authority. Let us now describe the third type of authority identified by Max Weber.

Box 16.2

Routinisation

Weber used routinisation to mean the “transformation of charismatic leadership into institutionalised leadership where one office takes the place of a personality as the focus of authority” (Scruton 1982: 415).

Check Your Progress 2

i) Tick mark the correct answer.

Which one of the following is not a type of authority according to Weber?

- a) Traditional authority
- b) Rational-legal authority
- c) Charismatic authority
- d) Personal authority

ii) Tick mark the correct answer.

When the original charisma of a leader gets transformed into traditional or rational-legal authority, what does Weber call it?

- a) Routinisation of one's power to capture devotion of ordinary people

- b) Routinisation of legitimacy
 - c) Routinisation of one's ability to lead
 - d) Routinisation of one's capacity to control the behaviour of other's against their will
- iii) Tick mark the correct answer.

Traditional authority derive legitimacy from

- a) Law of the land
- b) Long standing customary law
- c) Outstanding performance of the leader
- d) All of the above.

16.3.1.2 Rational-legal Authority

The term refers to a system of authority, which are both, rational and legal. It is vested in a regular administrative staff who operate in accordance with certain written rules and laws. Those who exercise authority are appointed to do so on the basis of their achieved qualifications, which are prescribed and codified. Those in authority consider it a profession and are paid a salary. Thus, it is a rational system.

It is legal because it is in accordance with the laws of the land which people recognise and feel obliged to obey. The people acknowledge and respect the legality of both, the ordinance and rules as well as the positions or titles of those who implement the rules.

Rational-legal authority is a typical feature of modern society. It is the reflection of the process of rationalisation. Remember that Weber considers rationalisation as the key feature of western civilisation. It is, according to Weber, a specific product of human thought and deliberation. By now you have clearly grasped the connection between rational-legal authority and rational action for obtaining goals.

Let us look at examples of rational-legal authority. We obey the tax collector because we believe in the legality of the ordinances he enforces. We also believe that he has the legal right to send us taxation notices. We stop our vehicles when the traffic policeman orders us to do so because we respect the authority vested in him by the law. Modern societies are governed not by individuals, but by laws and ordinances. We obey the policeman because of his position and his uniform which represents the law, not because he is Mr. 'X' or Mr. 'Y'. Rational-legal authority exists not just in the political and administrative spheres, but also in economic organisations like banks and industries as well as in religious and cultural organisations.

16.3.2 Lack of Conformity between Typologies

From the above discussion on the types of social action and types of authority one may find that traditional authority corresponds to traditional action, rational-legal authority corresponds to rational action in relation to goal and charismatic authority corresponds to affective action or emotional

action. However one easily finds that Weber distinguishes four types of social action and only three types of authority. The lack of conformity between the typology of social action and the typology of authority is a subject for open discussion.

In order that you might clearly grasp the manner in which rational-legal authority functions it is necessary to examine the institution of 'bureaucracy'. Bureaucracy is the medium through which rational-legal authority is carried out and it is the subject matter of the next section (16.4). Before going to the next section, complete Activity 2.

Activity 2

Give an example of rational-legal or a traditional authority from your own society with special reference to the basis of legitimacy of that authority. Prepare note of one page. Exchange your note, if possible, with the notes of your co-learners at your Study Centre.

16.4 BUREAUCRACY

Bureaucracy, as just mentioned, is the machinery, which implements rational-legal authority. Max Weber studied bureaucracy in detail and constructed an ideal type which contained the most prominent characteristics of bureaucracy. Let us examine this ideal type which reveals to us the major features of bureaucracy.

16.4.0 Major Features of Bureaucracy

- i) In order that the bureaucracy may function adequately, it relies on the following rules and regulations.
 - a) The activities which comprise bureaucracy are distributed among the officials in the form of official duties.
 - b) There is a stable or regular system by which officials are vested with authority. This authority is strictly delimited by the laws of the land.
 - c) There are strict and methodical procedures which ensure that officials perform their duties adequately.

The above mentioned three characteristics constitute 'bureaucratic authority', which is to be found in developed and modern societies.

- ii) The second feature of bureaucracy is that there is a hierarchy of officials in authority. By this we mean that there is a firmly built structure of subordination and superordination. Lower officials are supervised by higher ones and are answerable to them. The advantage of this system is that governed people can express their dissatisfaction with lower officials by appealing to the higher ones. For instance, if you are dissatisfied with the behaviour or performance of a clerk or a section officer in an office, you can appeal to the higher official to seek redress.

- iii) The management of the bureaucratic office is carried out through written documents or files. They are preserved and properly kept by clerks who are specially appointed for this purpose.
- iv) The work in the bureaucratic office is highly specialised and staff is trained accordingly.
- v) A fully developed bureaucratic office demands the full working capacity of the staff. In such a case, officials may be compelled to work over-time.

Having looked the main features of a bureaucratic set-up, let us now learn something about the officials that you have found repeatedly mentioned above.

16.4.1 Characteristics of Officials in Bureaucracy

Weber mentions the following characteristics of officials in a bureaucratic set-up

- i) Office-work is a ‘vocation’ for officials.
- ii) They are specially trained for their jobs.
- iii) Their qualifications determine their position or rank in the office.
- iv) They are expected to do their work honestly.

Their official positions also have a bearing on their personal lives. Let us see how.

- i) Bureaucratic officials enjoy a high status in society.
- ii) Often, their jobs carry transfer liabilities. By this we mean that they may be transferred from one place or department to another leading to some instability in their professional and personal lives.
- iii) Officials receive salaries not in accordance with productivity but status. The higher their rank, the higher their salaries. They also receive benefits like pension, provident fund, medical and other facilities. Their jobs are considered very secure.
- iv) Officials enjoy good career prospects. They can move from the lower rungs of the bureaucratic ladder to higher ones if they work in a disciplined manner.

It is time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Bureaucracy is an example of
 - a) traditional authority.
 - b) rational-legal authority.
 - c) charismatic authority.
 - d) none of the above .

ii) Mention in three lines important features of bureaucratic authority.

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iii) Mention in four lines important characteristics of the officials of bureaucracy.

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16.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit began with a discussion of the Weberian concepts of ‘power’ and ‘authority’. It then went on to discuss the types of social action identified by Max Weber, followed by the types of authority described by him. Next you studied traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority in some detail. Finally, the unit focused upon bureaucracy as the instrument through which rational-legal authority operates. Not only did the unit outline the features of a bureaucratic office but also the officials or staff that constitute it.

16.6 KEYWORDS

Power	One’s capacity to impose his or her will on others
Authority	When power is legitimised it becomes authority
Ideal type	A methodological tool developed by Weber through which the most commonly found features of a phenomenon are abstracted. Ideal type is an analytical construct with which the social scientist compares existing reality.
Routinisation	A process of transformation of the charismatic authority either into traditional or rational legal authority
Money-economy	Any economic transaction made in terms of money

16.7 FURTHER READING

Bendix, Reinhard, 1960. *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*. Heinman: London

Freund, Julien 1968. *The Sociology of Max Weber*. Random House: New York

16.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Power is one's capacity to impose his or her will on others.
- ii) Power can be derived from a constellation of interests that develop in a formally free market situation. Power can again be derived from an established system of authority that allocates the right to command and duty to obey.
- iii)
 - a) Presence of individual ruler/master or a group of rulers/masters
 - b) Presence of an individual/group that is ruled
 - c) Evidence of influence of the rulers in terms of compliance and obedience shown by the ruled

Check Your Progress 2

- i) d)
- ii) a)
- iii) b)

Check Your Progress 3

- i) b)
- ii) Important features of bureaucratic authority are
 - a) it operates on the principle of jurisdictional area which relies on certain administrative regulations.
 - b) there is a stable regular system by which officials are vested with authority.
 - c) there are strict and methodical procedures which ensure that officials perform their duties adequately.
- iii) Important characteristics of the officials of bureaucracy are that
 - a) office work is a vocation for the official
 - b) officials are especially trained for their job
 - c) their qualifications determine their position or rank in the office, and
 - d) they are expected to do work honestly.